

**THE JOURNAL OF THE  
INTERNATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION FOR BON  
RESEARCH**



**LA REVUE DE L'ASSOCIATION  
INTERNATIONALE POUR LA  
RECHERCHE SUR LE BŔN**



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**Logo:** “Gshen rab mi bo descending to Earth as a Coucou bird” by Agnieszka Helman-Wazny

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# THE JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR BON RESEARCH – LA REVUE DE L’ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONALE POUR LA RECHERCHE SUR LE BÖN (JIABR-RAIRB)

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**Introduction:** The JIABR – RAIRB is the yearly publication of the International Association for Bon Research. The IABR is a non-profit organisation registered under the Federal Canadian Registrar (DATE). IABR - AIRB is an association dedicated to the study and the promotion of research on the Tibetan Bön religion. It is an association of dedicated researchers who engage in the critical analysis and research on Bön according to commonly accepted scientific criteria in scientific institutes. The fields of studies represented by our members encompass the different academic disciplines found in Humanities, Social Sciences and other connected specialities. This association is devoted exclusively to scholarly exchanges and academic enquiries and promotes research as well as the dissemination of results on topics stemming from antiquity to the contemporary scene. IABR - AIRB is open to all. All research panels are especially open to those who use primary source material and fieldwork derived data in accordance with standard scientific research methods.

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**Reviews:** Publications for review should be submitted directly to the chief-editor at the above electronic address.



International Association for Bon Research



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**INAUGURAL ISSUE VOLUME 1 DECEMBER 2013**

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## Words from the Chief-editor

It is with great pleasure that I would like to introduce this new contribution to the field of Tibetan Studies in general and to the study of Bon society, culture, worldviews and religions which is this *Journal of the International Association for Bon Research*. The project started in 2008 at the Blou Conference on Bon. An assembled team of scholars decided enthusiastically to create a non-profit scholarly association which would focus on researching Bon in all its manifestations and from any periods of history. This organisation was conceived as an agent which would help disseminate discoveries and frontline research results in various forms, chiefly among them, through publications. This International Association for Bon Research was also mandated to coordinate and find means to support research by scholars (attached to a teaching, a research institution or independent) as well as graduate students. The overview was to help in the development of this relatively new field of research in Tibetan Studies which in the past, was often ignored or overshadowed by more popular themes.

This new scholarly venue and its inaugural issue is the direct result of the Conference on Bon, Shangshung and Early Tibet, hosted by the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in September 2011. This conference was organized by Dr Nathan W. Hill and assembled a variety of scholars, representatives of the Bon religion and important members of the Tibetan Buddhist community. The content of this volume reflects the variety of perspectives presented at the conference. Although most papers follow a scholarly approach, some include religious viewpoints and Tibetan traditional narratives. We have also included what we hope will be a continuing part of this Journal and that is, a section entitled 'Notes from the Field'. This will bring fresh data collected directly from fieldwork and presented simply, potentially without contextualization or analysis. Those chosen to be published are thought to bring significant contributions to our research area.

Together with our President, Professor Samten G. Karmay, I would like to thank Dr Nathan W. Hill, Jane Savory, and Professor Charles Ramble for their hard work in making the conference a success. We also extend our gratitude to SOAS, the London Shangshung Institute, the British Academy, and the Kalpa Group for the generous financial support the conference received. Finally, we thank Yongdzin Tenzin Namdak

of Triten Norbutse Bon Monastery, and Professor Namkhai Norbu for their contributions, as well as all of the participants and contributors to this volume.

J.F. Marc des Jardins  
Montreal, October 2013.

# Foreword<sup>1</sup>

H.E. Tenzin Namdak

There has always been a very close connection between the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies and Yungdrung Bon. I have been shown great kindness by the members of that University, and this is something I shall never forget. I also have very warm memories of the scholars I met in Cambridge University and the friends I made in Scotland during the three years I spent in the United Kingdom. Since I was forced to leave my own country, Britain has been like a second home to me.

The religious and secular culture of Zhangzhung and Tibet deserve systematic research. All areas of Bon that are subsumed within the Nine Ways should be understood as comprising the civilisation of the Bonpos. The Nine Ways of Bon are divided into the Four Ways of Cause and the Five Ways of Result. The first of the nine ways, The Shen of Prediction deals with: sortilege, astrology, protective and healing rituals (*Tô*), and Medicine and Diagnosis. Just to take the example of *Tô*: people sometimes perform these rituals casually, without holding them in high regard. That is a mistake. There is an enormous variety of these rituals, with a wide range of musical form, performance and structure. The purpose of *Tô* rituals is to put to rights anything that might be wrong in the world: treating illnesses, mending discord, helping whatever lives in the visible realm and bringing harmony to the Eight Categories of the Gods and Demons of the invisible realm. There may be a great deal of local variation in the components of the Shen of Prediction, but they all have a common origin in the teachings of the Enlightened One, Tönpa Shenrab, and flourish in many lands and in different languages.

Secondly, the Way of the Shen of the Visual World is concerned with offerings known as *Dö*. This Way is not just for the benefit of those living in the visible world: there is also a vast range of ritual activities concerned with offerings and oblations to the territorial divinities and place gods of the invisible realm. Among these ceremonies there are numerous rituals for ensuring harmony in the divine and natural world.

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<sup>1</sup> This preface/foreword is an abridged version of an address given at the conference through the medium of a video recording.

The third Way, the Way of the Shen of Illusion, contains methods for repelling hostile powers that cannot be dealt with by the techniques mentioned earlier: for example, in the case of demons that incite discord, we traditionally invoke the support of the gods and serpent-spirits. These rituals offer a means of restoring well-being. But if all these techniques fail, the aid of the gods and demons of the phenomenal world must be engaged, and the support of the tutelary divinities, the gods, goddesses, the dakinis and all the Bon protectors must be enlisted.

All the practices I have mentioned so far involve a variety of activities and have various names, and each has its own origins and accompanying explanations. But in sum, these all originated in the time of Zhangzhung, and they have continued intact down to the present day. For historical reasons people claim certain traditions, and not others, as their own, and apply them in wide variety of languages. But whatever the case, they are essentially about the same thing. Because the Four Ways of Cause are so widespread they can be seen as comprising the indigenous religion, traditions and customs of Tibet. Some of these practices are preserved in religion, others through folk traditions.

We are all born, and then we die. The Fourth Way, that of the Shen of Existence, is concerned with helping the deceased in the space between death and rebirth and for generating good fortune for the living and protecting them from harm. Tibetans have certain beliefs about what happens when someone dies, and in order to dispel these concerns certain rituals and activities for generating merit have to be performed, and measures that benefit the living and the dead should be taken.

Now, to come to the Ways of Result: the Fifth and Sixth Ways are respectively those of the Virtuous Adherers and the Way of the Ascetics. Both of these are Sutra traditions, containing the so-called 'Great Way' and 'Lesser Way'. The 'Lesser Way' is concerned exclusively with achieving wellbeing and liberation for oneself – which is precisely why it is called the Lesser Way. The Great Way is for those who are not content with assuring their own well being, but who realise that looking after their own interests while there are other living beings who are suffering is not a particularly noble achievement. Therefore they mainly approach liberation on the basis of great compassion and generating the thought of enlightenment.

The Seventh and Eighth Ways, the Way of the Pure Sound of White "A" and the Way of the Primordial Shen are respectively the first and second ways concerned with secret tantras. There are various tantric methods of accumulations and offerings on the basis of such tantric practices. Tantra requires mental concentration in addition to the

ritual performance, according to whatever tantric cycle is involved. The foundation of this practice is provided by the Three Contemplations: the Contemplation of Suchness of Absolute Nature; the All-illuminating Contemplation, and the Contemplation of Cause. If these three are not cultivated in proper measure, it is very difficult to achieve anything at all. Owing to local circumstances these traditions have mutated over the course of time, and careful investigation is required to verify whether these activities correspond to the teachings of the Enlightened One, Tönpa Shenrab, and one should of course first have a thorough understanding of the traditions in question. Customs of this sort developed in response to an ever-increasing demand on the part of communities, and they were satisfied with merely this much. But they should not be seen as representative of Bon tantric teachings.

Dzogchen, the Great Perfection, the highest Way, is the pinnacle of all the Ways. Our tradition has four major cycles. Each of these consists of a complete set of teachings comprising the main features and ancillary practices. Each one contains complete instructions that can lead to the attainment of enlightenment in a single lifetime. Since it is a pure supreme view beyond the conceptual mind, it cannot be changed or modified by the mind, and therefore cannot be claimed as one's own view or anyone else's view. As for the main purpose, the quest for the Base, one should try to find the absolute natural state of existence that cannot be modified by the conceptual mind. The attainment of that state is recognised as the view of the Supreme Way of the Great Perfection. The state that has been thus attained cannot be modified by conceptual thoughts; if one tries to articulate it in words it can't be spoken, and if one tries to think about it, it can't be thought about – this is what I mean by transcending the conceptual mind.

All this, in sum, is what the Nine Ways are about. Research on any aspect of the Nine Ways of Bon would be very worthwhile, but a study of the whole system would be very difficult indeed, if only because of the difficulty of the language and the huge amount of literature. But Bon is a vast treasure-house, and even focusing on one specific area could yield extraordinary results. There are world-famous universities, with good resources, and scholars who know the relevant languages, and research in this field is something I heartily welcome.

## Preface

by Chögyal Namkhai Norbu

I am very happy to have participated in the conference held at SOAS in September 2011, 'Bon, Shangshung and Early Tibet'. This conference coincides with the 50th anniversary of the 1960 Rockefeller Foundation programme, which brought a number of Tibetan scholars to the West, and the founding of the London Shangshung Institute for Tibetan Studies. The Rockefeller Foundation programme enabled Lopön Tenzin Namdak, one of the most distinguished scholars of Bon and a keynote speaker at this conference, to come to London as a visiting scholar at SOAS 50 years ago. Professor Samten Karmay from Paris (Centre de recherche sur les civilisations de l'Asie orientale) the other keynote speaker, who also came to SOAS 50 years ago, has also made significant academic contributions to the understanding of Bon.

The remaining academics and scholars including Tsering Thar - Professor and Dean of Minzu University of China, College of Tibetan Studies of Central University for Nationalities, Beijing - have all made major significant academic research and developments in the area of Bon, Shangshung and Early Tibet.

To grasp the relationship between the ancient history and culture of Shangshung and Tibet, we must understand that Shangshung is the original source of Tibetan culture and history. This is related to the ancient pre-Buddhist tradition of Bon in Tibet. Tibetan history and culture has come to be presented from the perspective of the later Buddhist tradition, but that is not the ancient Tibetan view. Without an understanding of its Shangshung roots, one cannot understand the source of Tibetan history and culture. When I arrived in Italy in 1960 as part of the Rockefeller programme previously mentioned, I did not have this understanding, because I had only studied in a Buddhist college. Later when I studied more the value of Tibetan history and the source of Tibetan culture, I realised that it is very important to understand how Tibetan history and culture are explained in the ancient Bon tradition.

At present we do not have any way of assessing the origins of the ancient Shangshung generations other than relying upon traditional oral accounts that

progressively appeared since very early times, and that have been incorporated within the ancient Bonpo culture as well as in those narratives that have been put into writing in historical times, on the basis of which later scholars compiled their religious and dynastic histories.

The study of Shangshung and Bon religious tradition that was present in Tibet for many centuries before the spread of Buddhism, is an indispensable reference point for research into the birth and history of the civilisation of Tibet. In order to have an overall picture of the origin and evolution of the history of Shangshung and Tibet, we can broadly divide this into three historical periods: in the first – c. beginning of the second millennium B.C.E. – only the kingdom of Shangshung existed; in the second, Shangshung co-existed with the new kingdom of Tibet located in the fertile Yarlung valley; the third starts with the annexation of Shangshung by Tibet, and ends with the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the ninth century.

The centre of the kingdom of Shangshung lay in what is now the region of Guge in western Tibet, but its domination spread over practically all the territory subsequently encompassed in central and eastern Tibet. The government of Shangshung probably did not exercise direct control over those regions, limiting itself to levying annual taxes; its civilisation and culture, however, based on the Bon tradition, spread widely in all parts of Tibet. The beginning of this era probably coincides with the life of the master Shenrab Miwoche [Gshen-rab Mi-bo-che] and of his royal patron Triwer Sergyi Charuchen [Khri-wer La-rje Gser-gyi Bya-ru-can]. As regards the name ‘Shangshung’, probably the original name was simply ‘Shung’ and ‘Shang’, [zhang: maternal uncle] was added later as a sign of respect, as many Tibetan kings had married princesses from Shangshung. The word ‘Shung’ [zhung] corresponds to the Tibetan khyung, the garuḍa eagle that in this ancient civilisation symbolised the fire element in Bon. Still today in the vicinity of Mount Kailash there remains a place called Khyunglung, ‘khyung valley’, which was for a time capital of the kings of Shangshung.

Research into the origins of Shangshung strongly correlates with accounts that would see the Shangshung people as descending originally from the Four or Six Tribes of Tibet (rus chen bzhi’am drug).

Since a knowledge of historically-based Bon is essential to know how the first Shangshung generations appeared, it would seem first of all necessary to ascertain how ancient Bon originated; but in reality, there is basically no way to determine, from a historical perspective, the origin of the first Bon lineages in Shangshung.



The indispensable resources through which we can understand the origins of ancient Shangshung amounts simply to what is left of the history of Shangshung. We certainly have to keep in mind that the foundation of the history is never separate from the various ways in which it has been expounded according to the Bon tradition, and that it is therefore necessary to base our research firmly upon such a foundation. There exist all sorts and numbers of elegant accounts and historical collections, but when they break away from that original foundation, they are deprived of a concrete historical basis. Just like any high and magnificent palace built upon shaky foundations eventually runs the risk of collapsing, these accounts do not establish the conditions for bringing the ancient culture to light.

Most of the history concerning the way in which our first ancestors came into being, how they conducted their lives, and so on, starts from people who lived during the Stone Age. Some historical cycles represent the kind of history that was produced simply on the basis of an oral tradition transmitted from father to son, from son to nephew, and from nephew to grandson.

The second period saw the rise of the dynasty of the emperors of Yarlung, a small kingdom in central Tibet, which was to lay the foundation of the Tibetan empire of the succeeding centuries. But the culture of the kingdom was that of Shangshung, as was Bon its religion. Although historical texts report that for thirty-three generations of kings, from the time of Nya khri Btsan po to that of Srong btsan Sgam po (d. 649 C.E.), the state religion was Bon and the king was always accompanied by one or more royal priests called sku gshen. These priests served as the king's bodyguards and were essential for maintaining his prestige and well-being as well as ensuring the prosperity of the people and the nation. Nevertheless there were occasions when the kings attempted to rebel against the power of the priestly caste, which was directly tied to the interests of the kingdom of Shangshung that initially enjoyed a sort of supremacy over the new state: it is sufficient to observe that the names of the Tibetan kings were conferred by the Bon priests in the language of Shangshung. Dri-gum Btsan po (ca. 1st century C.E.), the eighth king, was the first to try to suppress Bon, exiling all the priests and enforcing a harsh repression of the clergy. He was concerned about the growing prestige of the priestly caste and feared that Shangshung could conquer Tibet, a kingdom quite young in relation to the other and which still lacked adequate political and military power to protect its independence. But Dri gum btsan po's persecution did not achieve its desired ends; the king was murdered and with the accession of his successor Spu lde gung rgyal, Bon was reinstated in its prestigious position. In the light of subsequent events Dri gum btsan po's failure can be explained by the lack of a

culture to serve as an alternative to Bon of Shangshung. The endeavour to disengage the political power from the influence of the clergy was not accomplished until the reign of the king Srong btsan Sgam po. This king availed himself of the Buddhist culture from India and China, and succeeded in laying the foundation of a new culture and religion capable of bearing compassion with the autochthonous religion.

With this king begins the third and last phase of ancient Tibetan history, corresponding to the annexation of the kingdom of Shangshung and the culmination of the Tibetan empire, which in a short time became one of the greatest powers in Asia. Forging diplomatic ties with the rulers of Nepal and China, Songtsen Gampo promoted the introduction of Buddhism. However, it was only in the reign of king Khri srong Lde btsan (r. 742-797, C.E.) in the following century that Buddhism came to be officially adopted as the state religion. Having laid the foundation for the diffusion of a new culture, Songtsen Gampo prepared an ambush for King Ligmigya [Lig-mi-rgya] of Shangshung and murdered him, thus consummating the annexation of Shangshung. This marked the beginning of the decline of ancient Bon. Despite this blow to Bon, throughout the period of the Tibetan monarchy, the Tibetan king continued to be flanked by a Bonpo priest whom he asked to perform the most important rites to propitiate fortune and glory, on the birth of a prince, at a royal matrimony and on other momentous occasions.

The distinction as to when the history of a given people actually began at a certain point in time is determined by the invention of a writing system, and by the gradual recording of such a history in written form. This is a universal phenomenon that is not only applicable to the history of ancient Shangshung, but also to the history and the development of civilisation of all of humankind; such natural phenomena cannot be ignored and should be considered as an indispensable starting point for our research, as also when we investigate the origin of the ancient Shangshung people.

# Introduction

Per Kvaerne

“Well, we could read the story of the life of Tönpa Shenrap” – this answer from a Tibetan monk to a somewhat timid request for suitable reading matter was the beginning of a life-long friendship and turned out to be decisive for the academic career of a twenty-year old student from Norway.

I came to India early in 1966 – neither by air nor overland, but by boat, and when I returned to Norway in November that year, it was likewise by boat, having boarded a Norwegian cargo ship at Cochin in Kerala which brought me all the way to Hamburg. The voyage took three weeks. It gave me a concrete experience of distance that very few people can have today. My purpose in going to India was, like so many young people from the West (or injis, as we soon realized we were collectively called by the Tibetans) in the 1960s, was to work as a volunteer teacher in a Tibetan refugee school. We were idealistic and perhaps naïve. Looking back, like so many others, I realize that the Tibetans I met – then and later – gave me far more than I am likely to have given them in return.

But to return to the life story of Tönpa Shenrap. The kindly monk, whose monastic name was Sangye Tenzin, was, I realized, an adherent of the Bon religion. The little I knew about this religion I had learnt from reading Helmut Hoffmann’s *Quellen zur Geschichte der tibetischen Bon-Religion* from 1950, about which more below. But above all I had already been intrigued by Fosco Maraini’s caption of a photo of two Bon monks in his book *Secret Tibet: “The Etruscans of Asia”*. In my imagination, the Bonpos were the custodians of an ancient and enigmatic tradition, surviving in out-of-the-ways parts of Tibet, now doubly inaccessible through the Chinese occupation. And yet, here was a Bon monk, not only willing to share his knowledge with me, but also speaking excellent English, having spent several years in England as the assistant of Professor David Snellgrove before taking up a teaching assignment in India. I vaguely felt that this might give direction to my studies, indeed to my life, and, as it turned out, I was not mistaken.

Through daily reading sessions over the course of several months I was introduced to the two volumes of the *Gzer-mig*, the account of the exploits of Tönpa Shenrap, the divine teacher of Bon. I gradually understood that Bon was not a thinly disguised form of shamanism nor was it a sinister perversion of Buddhism; I realized that in the eyes of its adherents Bon is an immutable and profound doctrine and practice leading to spiritual illumination and ontological liberation. At the same time, I was - and have remained - fascinated by the lively and dramatic narrative of the *Gzer-mig*.

During my stay in India in 1966, I had the privilege of meeting most of the senior Bonpo monks who had escaped from Tibet around 1960: the abbot of Yungdrung Ling; the retired head teacher of Menri Monastery in the province of Tsang, commonly known as Horpa Pönlob; Tsöndrü Rinpoche, and others. The Bon religion, I realized, was a living, complex and sophisticated spiritual and cultural tradition.

To cut a long story short, I invited my Bonpo teacher and friend to come to Norway the following year to live with my family. Compared to the present time, when a huge bureaucracy is guided by laws reflecting deep mistrust to any visitor from outside our own part of the world, the procedure was simple: a phone call (at which I was present) by the head of the newly-formed Norwegian 'Help Tibet' association (which already ran a school in Norway for forty Tibetan boys) to the 'competent authority', ran as follows: "Good morning sir, this N.N. We have a Tibetan monk in India that we would like to invite to Norway for a couple of years. Would that be all right?" The answer, which I still remember verbatim: "Why, yes of course! He is most welcome". A simple visa application being the only subsequent formality, Sangye Tenzin soon found himself in Norway, where he spent almost two years. My own teacher at the University of Oslo, Professor Nils Simonsson, had studied Tibetan in Paris with Marcelle Lalou, but had never heard the language actually being spoken before. Accordingly he was delighted to engage a deeply learned Tibetan monk as part-time teacher of Tibetan - those were the days when a professor could just go ahead and do that sort of thing without writing a fifty-page project proposal!

By this time, a new departure in the study of Bon had been marked by the publication, in 1967, of the volume entitled *The Nine Ways of Bon*, a selection of passages from the 14th-century text *Gzi-brjid*, translated and presented by David Snellgrove. The importance of this book can hardly be overrated. Here, for the first time, Bon was presented as a vast and coherent religious system of ritual, healing,

thought and meditation – on the basis of its own texts. While – needless to say – the translation conformed to every exigency of a rigorous academic approach, it had been made possible by a close and respectful collaboration with Tenzin Namdak, an extraordinarily learned Bonpo monk who had been the Head Teacher (slob dpon) of Menri Monastery in Tibet. Lobsö Tenzin Namdak is still active today, forty-five years later, as an internationally revered scholar and spiritual guide.

For my Master thesis, I wished to make a similar, although of course far more modest contribution: I wanted to present a significant text from the Bon literature. Following the advice of my teacher Sangye Tenzin, I started translating part of a Dzogchen text, the A khrid thun mtshams bco lnga. At the time, apart from the excerpts published by David Snellgrove in *The Nine Ways of Bon*, hardly anything was known of the Dzogchen system of thought and meditation. Sangye Tenzin introduced me to Samten Gyaltsen Karmay, who came over to Oslo. Samten, who soon became and has remained to this day a very dear friend, had started to prepare his thesis based on a translation of the history of Bon by Shardza Tashi Gyaltsen (1859-1935) (eventually published in the London Oriental Series in 1972 as *The treasury of good sayings: A Tibetan history of Bon*), and he, too, provided invaluable help with my thesis, perhaps more than I realized at the time. I therefore take this opportunity to thank him again most sincerely.

In 1969, after the passing away of the abbot of Menri, Sangye Tenzin was elected as his successor, becoming the 33rd abbot in a line stretching back to the founder, Sherap Gyaltsen who had founded the monastery in Tibet in 1405. Sangye Tenzin therefore returned to India and started organizing the monastery on land provided for the Bonpo community at Dolanji, near the town of Solan in Himachal Pradesh. He was henceforth known by his new monastic name of Lungtog Tenpai Nyima.<sup>1</sup>

After I obtained my M.A. in 1970, I decided to attempt three tasks in the hope of contributing towards a foundation for future studies of Bon. Firstly, I felt that *The Nine Ways of Bon* provided the key for some kind of overview of the Bon religion in the Tibetan context, but also in the broader context of the history of religions, and that a criticism of older approaches to Bon in the West could now be justified. This, then, I attempted to do in an article, published in the journal *Numen*.<sup>2</sup> Although Hoffmann's book, referred to above, already appeared to be outdated, I have since realized that it is

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<sup>1</sup> The only biography of the Abbot Lungtog Tenpai Nyima is by Bya-phur Nam-mkha' rgyal mtshan (1994) *Bon gyi gong sa chen po skyabs rje Lung rtogs bstan pa'i nyi ma dpal bzang po'i rnam par thar pa kun bzang dgyes pa'i mchod sprin*, Ochghat, H.P., India.

<sup>2</sup>(1972) Aspects of the Origin of the Buddhist Tradition in Tibet. *Numen*, 19(1), 22-40.

in fact a remarkable piece of scholarship, a learned attempt to make sense of the little information about Bon which was available in the West in the 1940's. As an aside, I might mention that in my article in *Numen* I suggested, in an entirely unsystematic way but possibly for the first time, the link between the ancient language of Zhang-zhung, as transmitted in Bon texts, and the present-day dialects of Kinnaur. This is a field that has since been vastly developed by linguists, but at the time the only real contribution to what one today may call Zhang-zhung studies was a slim (but extremely useful) volume by the Danish scholar Erik Haarh.<sup>3</sup>

The second part of my plan (I avoid the word 'project', as this term nowadays seems to apply mainly to attempts at obtaining research funding) was to establish a chronological frame for a study of the history in Tibet of the Bon religion. Fortunately the Bonpos in India had already published a *bstan rtsis*, a 'chronology of the Doctrine', composed in 1842 by Nyima Tenzin, one of the abbots of Menri Monastery. Thanks to the encouragement of Dr. Haarh, my translation was published in *Acta Orientalia* (Copenhagen) in 1971.<sup>4</sup> While all dates provided by the *bstan rtsis* certainly could not be taken at face value (Tönpa Shenrab, for example, is stated to have lived some 17,000 years ago), it nevertheless provided a chronological framework to which scholars continue to refer.

The third part of my plan was to provide some kind of overview of the canonical texts of Bon, the Bon Kanjur. The existence of such a collection had been long known – George Roerich, for example, mentions seeing a set consisting of 140 volumes in a Bon monastery near Nagchu in 1928.<sup>5</sup> The contents were, however, largely unknown. Nevertheless, a catalogue (*dkar chag*) had been published in New Delhi by Dr. Lokesh Chandra in the 1960's, and I set about analyzing the contents. It emerged that practically all the texts belong to various types of 'textual treasures' (*gter ma*), and furthermore that the older ones – more or less up to the 11th century – tended to have been 'discovered' accidentally while the later ones usually came to light as the result of the intervention of supernatural beings, or even as inspirations arising in the minds of spiritual masters. This study was published in *Indo-Iranian Journal* in 1974, providing

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<sup>3</sup>(1968) *The Zhang-zhung Language. A Grammar and Dictionary of the Unexplored Language of the Tibetan Bonpos. Acta Jutlandica XL:1, Aarhus.*

<sup>4</sup> A Chronological Table of the Bon-po. The *bstan-rtsis* of Ņi-ma *bstan-'jin*. *Acta Orientalia*, vol 33 (1971), pp. 205-282.

<sup>5</sup>George Roerich (1931). *Trails to Inmost Asia. Five Years of Exploration with the Roerich Central Asian Expedition*. New Haven, p. 365.

the titles, number of volumes etc. of each section of this vast textual heritage.<sup>6</sup> For many years this was the only overview in the West of the Bon canon.

Times have changed; now several editions of the Bon Kanjur are available. In the early 1990's the Oslo University Library acquired a complete set. In order to catalogue it, I organized in 1994-95 a team at the Centre for Advanced Study at the Norwegian Academy of Science and Letters in Oslo, in which Tibetan as well as Western scholars participated. No less than three Tibetan scholars from the PCR, two from Lhasa and one from Beijing, spent a full academic year in Oslo; two of them had grown up in Bonpo communities. The result of this project was a detailed catalogue providing all kinds of information about every text in the Bon Kanjur. Through the kindness of Dr. Yasuhiko Nagano, this catalogue eventually (2003) appeared in the Senri Ethnological Reports series, published by the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka.

During the last couple of decades, the study of Bon has made immense progress, and many scholars are actively engaged in it, to such an extent that a neologism has been coined, viz. 'Bonology'. This is not the place for a roll call of the many excellent contributions, large and small, that have been made in this field over the years. Being in some sense a 'veteran', I may perhaps nevertheless be permitted to offer a few reflections on the present 'Stand und Aufgaben' of the study of Bon.

My first reflection is that being scholars, we should always strive to see Bon as an element in the cultural history of Tibet. We should try to understand Bon in its social, doctrinal and spiritual interaction with other religious traditions over the centuries in Tibet. At the same time, it is certainly not only legitimate, but indeed illuminating to look further afield, and compare the religious configuration in Tibet with those of other Asian countries. For instance, certain structural parallels between Bon and Buddhism in Tibet and Shinto and Buddhism in Japan have been pointed out, and could probably be explored further. Certainly there is also much to be discovered if the contacts between Tibet and neighbouring cultures, especially the Chinese, Iranian and Indian cultures, are explored more energetically. On the other hand, I would warn against the tendency to speak of "Zhang-zhung culture" as if this were a known, or even knowable entity. There was beyond doubt a historical state and/or cultural area, broadly localized in present-day Western Tibet, known as Zhang-zhung, and this entity in due course became the object of Tibetan (Bonpo) literary elaborations and popular beliefs. This is in itself an important and fascinating process, but should not be

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<sup>6</sup> The Canon of the Tibetan Bonpos. *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 16,1 (1974), pp. 18-50 and 16,2, pp. 96-144.

confused with historical reality, about which – as far as the pre-tenth century history of the origins of Bon is concerned – we still in fact know remarkably little.

It is rather striking that Bon – at least as now practised and propagated outside Tibet, especially in the West – is in the process of being confused with New Age phenomena such as healing and neo-shamanism. That this new brand of Bon provides spiritual sustenance for Western adherents of Bon is not surprising, and in a certain sense inevitable. Of greater significance, it seems to me, is the fact that this process of change seems to be accepted by many among the younger, monastically educated Bon monks and integrated into their own understanding of their identity. One is reminded of the Tibetan diaspora's somewhat similar adoption of the concept of 'eco-Tibet'. It would be a mistake to applaud or condemn this development. It would, however, be a worthwhile object of study in its own right.

I have supervised many students of Tibetan religion and culture at various academic levels, but as a supervisor I have never been concerned with aiming to focus on studies of Bon in particular. However, I have had the privilege of helping a number of young scholars from Tibet in preparing their dissertations for the M.A. degree; these scholars have chosen various aspects of Bon as their theme and in several cases themselves come from Bon communities. These young Tibetan academics, who thanks to a special agreement with the 'competent authorities' have been able to come to Norway to study at our universities, have never had a traditional monastic training, but are trained in and committed to the critical, source-oriented method of research which is the basis of universities everywhere. Elsewhere in Europe individual Tibetans with a background in Bon have obtained academic degrees and in at least one case, a Ph.D. degree (Leiden). This is extremely encouraging and indeed indispensable if we want our work to be meaningful outside a narrow circle of scholars, and eventually perhaps filter through to Bon communities.

\* \* \*

On a cold and rainy evening in December 1969, the newly-elected abbot Lungtok Tenpai Nyima and I tried to warm our hands over an old tin bucket containing a few pieces of burning charcoal, the only semblance of heating in a simple farm-house on the land provided for the Bon community at Dolanji. This house, with its earth floor and windows having pieces of sacking instead of glass, was one of only a couple of buildings already standing. When I visited Dolanji again, in 1973, the main temple was already under construction, on the basis of drawings made by the Abbot Lungtok Tenpai Nyima who also supervised every detail of the work. Some years later, an



organized religious community had been established, windows had been fitted with panes of glass, and the Abbot resided in a small but practical house, the bla brang, that also served as office for the community. Everything was solidly brick-built but faithful to traditional Tibetan architectural style. And so it has continued. Under the dynamic leadership of the Abbot, the Bon monastery at Dolanji is now a flourishing institution housing close to two hundred young Tibetan monks pursuing an eight-year course of study for the Geshe degree; there is a separate temple for rituals performed by lay yogins; there is also a nunnery where the young nuns are taught philosophy and debate, just like the monks. There is a fully equipped, professionally organized library with internet access and books in many languages, a printing centre, a video room, a five-storey hospital, communal kitchen, and a hotel for guests with comfortable room overlooking the valley, all with attached bathrooms.

This is, all in all, a remarkable achievement. It is difficult to conceive of this modern, bustling community as the Asian counterpart to the enigmatic Etruscans. Yet a certain mystery remains, in spite of the increasingly mainstream character of Tibetan monastic life, here as well as elsewhere in the diaspora. Who, exactly, are the Bonpos? How, when and where was this religion formed? These are still questions to which one can still only discern vague contours of an answer, and thus call upon further research from scholars and on reflection and openness on the part of the adherents of Bon.

# Queen of the World and her Twenty-seven Daughters

Samten G. Karmay

In 1983 when I arrived at the Menri Monastery in Dolanji, Himachal Pradesh, India to carry out field research I found that the monastery was full of activity rehearsing religious dances (*'cham*). I soon learned that the monastery had received an invitation from the Festival de Lille in France to put on a show of traditional Tibetan religious dance as part of the Festival's cultural programme. The date of departure for Europe was less than two weeks away. Three types of dance were chosen and about ten young monks were selected to travel. However, there were no papers printed in either Tibetan or English explaining what *'cham* was all about. I was therefore asked to write a short article in English giving a historical account of the dances. In view of the short notice I was given I was rather reluctant to do it, but it was absolutely necessary to have some written explanations (Karmay 1998: 190-99).

In France, apart from Lille, the dances were also performed at the Musée Guimet in Paris in the presence of both Professors David L. Snellgrove and R. A. Stein.<sup>1</sup>

One of the three *'cham* chosen to go to Lille was about the goddess Srid pa'i rgyal mo, Queen of the World, with her nine daughters, called Gze ma dgu. These were the first nine of the goddess' twenty-seven daughters.

In the Bon pantheon this goddess plays a multifarious role which suggests that she occupies a matriarchal position. Under different names, she is a partner of various tantric deities as well as manifesting herself as a religious protector. In her iconography she is described as having nine hundred heads and one thousand arms (*dbu brgya phyag stong*, Text A, folio 372).<sup>2</sup> Her complexion changes six times in twenty-four hours: at dusk she is black; at midnight, blue; before dawn, white; at sunrise, yellow; at midday, red; and in the afternoon, brown (Text A, folio 373). Half of the sky is her canopy (*gnam*

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<sup>1</sup> In May 2011 a Czech non-governmental organization called Potala in Prague invited the monks from Menri Monastery to perform the same dances in Prague and other places in the Czech Republic.

<sup>2</sup> For the reference of Text A see below.

*phyed bla yi khebs*) and half of the earth is her mate (*sa phyed 'og gi gdan*, Text A, folio 374).

It is in her aspect of religious protector with her twenty-seven daughters that the 'cham based on her is performed. In this aspect she has a fierce look and rides on a mule. Before 1950, in most monasteries the dance was limited to the first nine daughters, but in some monasteries the dance included the twenty-seven daughters together with the mother, hence twenty-eight figures in all. In the Buddhist tradition there is a parallel tradition of the twenty-eight goddesses called *Dbang phyug ma nyer brgyad* (Blezer 2000).

In the Bon tradition the myth of the goddess is connected with a group of tantras known as *Khro bo rgyud drug* (The Six Tantras of *Khro bo*, cf. Martin et al. 2003, No. 64). *Khro bo* here is the name of a deity whose female partner is no other than *Srid pa'i rgyal mo* herself, under her name *Mkha' la gdug mo*. The myth of the goddess and her twenty-seven daughters is fully presented in the collection of the *Zhi khro*<sup>3</sup> ritual texts. The myth of the goddess is contained in three texts.

Two of the three texts are believed to have been 'treasure texts' (*gter ma*) of *Gshen chen Klu dga'* (995-1035) while the third is a treasure text of *Rma ston Srid 'dzin*. According to the Bon chronology, *Gshen chen Klu dga'* revealed his texts in 1017 C.E. If this date is credible, which needs to be independently verified, the texts in question would date back to the 11th century. The revelation of *Rma ston* (b. 1092) is said to have taken place in 1108 (Karmay 1972: 168).

### The titles of the three texts:

- A. *Khro bo dbang chen gyi las kyi dbal mo nyer brgyad pho nyar 'gyed pa*, ff. 371-414  
(the relevant passages: ff. 376-377, Karmay 1977, Text No. 29, 16,).
- B. *Khro bo dbang chen las kyi spar ma nyi shu rtsa brgyad rtags kyi sgrub pa*, ff. 353-550 (the relevant passages: ff. 540-550, Karmay 1977, Text No. 29, 19).

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<sup>3</sup> For the list of the *Zhi khro* ritual texts see Karmay 1977.

- C. *Gsang ba thugs kyi brnag pa khro bog gsang thus*, ff. 1485-1571 (the relevant passage: ff. 1527-1537, Karmay 1977, Text No. 29, 22). This text is mentioned in the *Legs bshad rin po che'i gter mdzod* (Karmay 1972: 168, 326, l.34)

The goddess is regarded as belonging to the class of goddesses known as *Dbal mo*, “female dbal”. Prof. Snellgrove describes the *Dbal mo* goddesses as “a class of powerful flesh-eating goddesses” (1967: 304).

## The ancient manuscripts from Dga' thang

In 2006 manuscripts were discovered in the ruins of an old Buddhist stūpa at Dga' thang in southern Tibet (Pa tshab Pa sangs dbang 'dus & Glang ru Nor bu tshe ring 2007). Among these manuscripts there is a passage that looked like what might have been a prototype of the mythical account of the goddess. However, the manuscript is so full of spelling errors, omissions, incoherence and inconsistencies that it might just be nothing but an old faulty copy. The fact that it was found in the stūpa shows that there is no doubt about its antiquity, which in turn proves that the texts discovered by Gshen chen are of ancient origin.

In a previous article (Karmay 2009) I discussed at length the dates of the manuscripts without reaching any definite conclusion since it is not known when the stūpa was built or by whom. However, judging by the style of writing, grammatical structure, the type of vocabulary and the notions that are expressed, there is no doubt that the Dga' thang manuscripts are very old, probably pre-11th century. Another element that I should emphasize particularly is the absence of Buddhist vocabulary. The Dga' thang manuscripts are therefore redolent of the Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts.

I have made a rough translation of the passage from the Dga' thang manuscripts in order to demonstrate how closely it relates to that revealed by Gshen chen in terms of subject, but how different they are textually. The contents of the Dga' thang manuscripts may have provided material for Gshen chen in the writing of his texts. As well, I have reproduced the transliterated Dga' thang passage as well as a photographic copy of the manuscript itself (Fig. 1-4). I have also reproduced part of the passage from

Gshen chen's texts below (Text A) so that it can be compared with the passage from the Dga' thang manuscripts.

## Translation of the Dga' thang manuscript (p.97, l. 6- p.90, l.5).

[Fig.1]

A story of the *gnag*.<sup>4</sup> It is called the nine siblings of the *byad* <sup>5</sup> deities and also the nine eggs of the *dbal zi ma*.<sup>6</sup>

In Gung dang, the heaven

There were three brothers of the wild deities

They were in search of marriage

“O! Gnam phyi gung rgyal<sup>7</sup> (if we could join you in marriage)?”

Gnam phyi replied:

There is no greater than me, more powerful than me.

Man and offspring of the gods cannot join together.

The offspring of the dragon and the *khyung* eagle cannot compete with each other

(They did join together in the space) between the thunder and lightning [Fig.2]

Nine white eggs as big as the head of a young yak were produced

(1) One of the eggs of *dbal zi ma*

Was sprung<sup>8</sup> and hatched with the sound of the dragon crying

There appeared a being with a human's body and a dragon's head

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<sup>4</sup> The normal meaning of the term *gnag* is 'cattle', including yaks, but in the context here it is used in such a way that it covers the 'animal kingdom'.

<sup>5</sup> The term *byad* designates, amongst other things, a kind of evil spirit. So the word *byad gsas* seems to stand for "deities who are against evil spirits".

<sup>6</sup> This is a spelling variation of the term *gze ma*. For a short discussion on this term see below.

<sup>7</sup> Another name of the goddess (cf. Karmay 1998: 129, 145, *et seq.*).

<sup>8</sup> The alternative spelling of this term, *brtol*, is *brdol ba*, 'to overflow', 'to spring up'. It occurs in Text A, folio 407.

Her [hands] were in the form of wings of knives  
And feet in the form of swords  
She has nineteen blazing iron canine teeth  
She devours her foe's flesh, *ljibs se ljibs*  
And slurps her foe's blood, *rubs se rubs*  
She stirs up her foe's kingdom  
She strikes her foe with her hand in the form of knives  
And cuts off her foe's lineage until the 7th generation.  
She stamps her sword feet  
That root up her foe's heart and soul.<sup>9</sup>  
Her spell is: *du yu nan nan sen mo sbrul/ ni ti nying/* So should be recited.  
Imagine that she comes and reaches the 'four souls'<sup>10</sup> of the human body [of the foe].

(2) Another egg of *dbal zi ma*

It was hatched with the sound of the water spirit cry  
[There appeared a being] with a human body that had a dragon's head with its lock of hair  
(Her hands) are in the form of wings of knives  
She has eighteen blazing conch teeth  
She devours her foe's flesh, *ljibs se ljibs*  
And slurps her foe's blood, *rubs se rubs*  
She devours also her foe's fresh heart  
She looks at it and then puts it into her mouth

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<sup>9</sup> The manuscript has *brla*, which in standard Tibetan orthography means 'thigh', but the word intended is probably *bla* 'soul'. The spelling *brla* for *bla* 'soul' is found in the Dunhuang documents, e.g. *mye btsa dpyad 'di ni // tshes grangs te sbyar te / brla ga-la gnas pa / brtags nas / thog du ma bab bya'o //* 'one needs to calculate the time, determine where the soul is residing [at that time] and not apply [moxibution] there' (Pelliot tibétain 1044, ll. 53-54, cf. Yoeli-Tlalim 2008: 231).

<sup>10</sup> Here the manuscript again has *brla* for *bla* 'soul'. Note, however, that for Tibetans each person has only one soul (cf. Karmay 1998: 311).

Her eyes open wide  
 She stamps her feet.  
 Her spell should be recited.

(3) Another egg of the *dbal zi ma*  
 It was hatched with the sound of the winter queen  
 (There appeared) a black *dbal* woman<sup>11</sup> [Fig.3]  
 She has canine teeth in the form of knives  
 She has copper hair that is well combed  
 She wears a tiger skin cloak  
 That is girdled with a snake belt around her waist  
 She holds a heavenly wheel in her hands  
 She stirs up her foe's ancestral spirits in their graves

(4) Another egg of *dbal zi ma*  
 It was hatched at the heaven door of the *dbal* fort  
 A red *dbal* woman<sup>12</sup> (appeared)  
 Her iron lock of hair trails on the ground  
 A full tiger pelt hangs down from her shoulders  
 She leads the nine siblings of the *the'u rang* spirits as her retinue  
 Seize [offspring] from under the arm of the foe!

(5) Another egg of *dbal zi ma*  
 It was hatched in the centre of the Milky Way

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<sup>11</sup> This is certainly an error. It should be a being with a human body and a head of an animal like the other members of the group, cf. No. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Here again this is an error. It should be a being with a human body and a head of an animal like the other members of the group, cf. No. 7.

A being with a human body and a wolf's head (appeared)  
Her hands were in the form of knives  
She has wings in the form of swords  
Separate our foes from their gods!

(6) Another egg of *dbal zi ma*

It was hatched with the sound of the blazing fire  
A being with a human body and a tiger's head (appeared)  
She was called Byed gsas sha zan po  
For her the foe's flesh is more delicious than the barley dough  
She is a female messenger, wearing a brown dress  
For her, the foe's blood is more delicious than ale  
And the marrow of the foe is better than butter.

(7) Another egg of *dbal zi ma*

It was hatched with sound of the playing of a drum and the *gshang* bell  
[Fig.4] A being with the body of a bear<sup>13</sup> and the head of the *garuda* bird (appeared)  
Her head horn is [as big as] the Milky Way in the heavens  
Eat the flesh and bone of the foe as your food!  
You steal the male  
You look in the face of the female, Go!

(8) Another *dbal zi ma* egg

A being who has the wings of the awesome *khyung* eagle  
That waves a snake in the wind  
Her eight mouths are open and never satiated

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<sup>13</sup> Here again, it is evidently an error in the manuscript. It is meant to be a human body.



Her canine teeth can reach a thousand miles away  
 When you are dispatched in the middle night  
 You frighten the gods of the foe  
 Seize the son of the foe from under his arm  
 Eat his descendants till the seventh generation as your food.

(9) (The 9th is missing from the manuscript).

### Comments on the passage from the Dga' thang manuscript

In the Bon tradition the term *dbal* designates a class of gods. It is also the name of a mythical land, *dBal yul*. The priests from there are called *dbal bon* and *dbal gshen*. The word *zi ma* has the sense of 'scum'. This is not what is meant here. Spelled '*gze ma*' it simply designates a 'plant', especially a 'thorny plant' in *gze ma ra mgo*. However, in Text A forty-three philosophical explanations separating the two syllables '*gze*' and '*ma*' are given, but none of these is plausible as a definition of the term *gze ma* (Text A, folios 399-403). The goddesses are also called *dbal gyi spar ma*, the '*Spar ma* of the *Dbal*' (Text A, folio 373), the word *spar ma* having the sense of 'claw'. Several members of the nine sisters bear claws as their attributes.

### Transliteration of the passage from the Dga' thang manuscript (p.97, l. 6-p.90, l.5)

[Fig.1]

/gnag pa rabs gcig la/ byed gsas  
 /spun dgu zhes yang [kyang] bya/  
 /dbal zi ma sgong du zhes yang [kyang] bya/  
 /lha yul gung [thang] na/

/lha rgod mched gsum po/  
/khab dang byal [dbyal] btsal ba/  
/gnam phyi gung rgyal lags/  
/gnam phyi'i zhal na re/  
/nga las che myed btsan myed par/  
/myi dang lha'i bu gdan du myi bshos so/  
/'brug dang khyung ghyi [gi] bu dran kyi ['gran gyi] do ma lags/  
/thog dang glog gyi [gi] bar du bshos pa'i bu/

[Fig.2]

sgong nga dkar po g.yag rus [grus] 'go [mgo] tsam brgu [dgu] bsrid [srid] do/

(Egg No. 1)

/dbal zi ma sgong cig [gcig] ni/  
'brug ngur ba'i sgra las brtol [brdol]/  
/myi 'i [myi'i] lus po la/  
'brug kyi [gi] 'go [mgo] bo can/  
/chu dri'i [gri'i] gshog pa can/  
/ral gyi'i rgang [gri'i rkang] pa can/  
/lcags kyi mche ba rgu gnyis bcvo brgyad 'bar bas/  
/gra [dgra] bo'i sha za ljibs se ljibs/  
/gra [dgra] bo'i khrag 'thung rubs se rubs/  
/gra [dgra] bo'i rgyal khams krug [dkrugs] par byed/  
/chu dri'i [gri'i] lag brdabs pas/  
/gra [dgra] bo'i bdun rgyud [brgyud] gcod par byed/  
/ral gyi'i [gri'i] brdabs pas/  
/gra' [dgra] bo'i don rnying brla dang rtsa [rtsad] nas gcod/  
/de 'i [de'i] sngags la/

/du yu nan sen mo sbrul/  
 /ni di nying/ zhes brjod do/  
 /brla bzhi dang myi 'i [myi'i] lus po 'ongs br bsam mo/

## (Egg No. 2)

/yang dbal gyi zi ma sgong gcig ni/  
 /klu ngur ba'i sgra las brtol [brdol is possible]/  
 /myi 'i [myi'i] lus po la 'brug kyi [gi] ral ba can/  
 /chu dri'i [gri] gshog pa can/  
 /dung gyi [gi] mche ba rgu gnyis bcvo brgyad 'bar bas/  
 /gra [dgra] bo'i sha za'a ljibs se ljibs/  
 /gra [dgra] bo'i khrag 'thung rubs se rubs/  
 /gra'a [dgra] bo'i snying khrag rlon pa la/  
 /tsho tsho byed cing zhal du bstobs [bstabs]/  
 /mig grad do/  
 /rkang pa brdabs so/  
 /sngags bzlas so/

## (Egg No. 3)

/yang dbal gyi zi ma sgong cig [gcig] ni/  
 rgun gyi rgyal mo'i sgra las brtol/  
 /dbal gyi myi [Fig. 3] myi nag po la/  
 /chu dri'i [gri'i] mche ba can/  
 zings pra [skra] dmar mo shed de shad/  
 /stag kyi [gi] slag pa gsol/  
 /sbrul gyi ska rag rked la bcings/  
 /gnam gyi 'khor lo phyag na bsams/

*gra'a [dgra] bo'i dur gyi mtshun khruks cig [dkruks shig]/*  
*/chu dri'i [gri] mche ba bdar ba la/*  
*/gra [dga] bo'i sha za ljibs se ljibs/*  
*/gra'a [dgra] bo'i khrag 'thung rngubs se rngubs/*

(Egg No. 4)

*/yang dbal [gyi missing] zi ma sgong gcig ni/*  
*/dbal mkhar gnam sgo can nas brtol/*  
*/de'i nang na/*  
*/dbal gyi myi po [mo] dmar po la/*  
*/lcags kyi ral pa sa la bshal/*  
*/stag kyi [gi] g.yang bzhi phrag la gzad [gzar]/*  
*/the'u brang [rang] spun rgu 'bangs su khrid/*  
*/gra'a [dgra] bo'i mchan lan nas [mchan nas] byung [bu] phrogs cig [shig]/*

(Egg No. 5)

*/yang dbal (gyi missing) zi ma sgong gcig ni/*  
*/rgu tshigs gzhung las brtol/*  
*/myi 'i [myi'i] lus po la spyang khu'i 'go [mgo] bo can/*  
*/chu dri'i [gri'i] lag pa can/*  
*/ral gyi'i [gri'i] gshog pa can/*  
*/gra [dgra] bo'i myi dng lhar phrol cig/*

(Egg No. 6)

*/yang dbal [gyi, missing] zi ma sgong gcig ni/*  
*/mye 'bar ba'i sgra las brtol/*  
*/myi' 'i [myi'i] lus po la/*

/stag kyi [gi] 'go mgo] bo can/  
 /mying dang mtshan btags pa/  
 /byad gsas sha zan po/  
 /gra'a [dgra] bo'i sha ni zan bas zhim/  
 /kham kham mnabs cig [zhing] pho nya ma/  
 //gra'a [dgra] bo'i khrag ni chang bas zhim/  
 /gra'a [dgra] bo'i lhe rkang mar bas zhim/

## (Egg No. 7)

/yang dabl [gyi missing] zi ma sgong gcig ni/  
 /rnga gshang krol [dkrol] ba'i sgra las brtol/  
 [Fig. 4] /dom gyi [myi'i] lus po la/  
 /khyung gyi [gi] 'go [mgo] bo can/  
 /klad kyi bya ru gnam gyi rgu tshigs tsam/  
 /gra'a [dgra] bo'i sha rus zan du zo/  
 /pho rku bed la/  
 /mo bad byed la bso/

## (Egg No. 8)

/dbal [gyi missing] zi ma sgong gcig la/  
 /rngam chen khyung gyi [gi] gshog pa la/  
 /sbrul rlung khu gyi [yi] g.yab mos [mo] 'debs/  
 /chog myi shes kyi zhal zhal brgyad gdengs/  
 /mche ba dpag tshad stong slebs ma/  
 /nam gyi gung la mngags pa'i tshe/  
 /gra'a [dgra] bo'i lha sngangs par byed/  
 /gra'a [dgra] bo'i mchan nas bu phrogs cig [shig]/

*/gra'a [dgra] bo'i bdun rgyud [brgyud] tshun chad zas su gsol/*

(Egg No. 9 is missing)

### Text A from Gshen chen

[f. 375]

*mi bzad gnam [376] gyi lha rgod thog pa dang/  
bar snang sgra yi nang du gnyis med thabs kyis rol/...  
thabs kyis rol bar mdzad pa'i byin rlabs kyis/  
dbal gyi spar ma nyi shu rtsa bdun byung/  
dbal gsas rngam pa thugs kyi pho nya mo/  
srid pa'i sgong nga dang po dgu brtol ba/  
mi bzad dbal gyi gze ma mgo dgu ste/  
sngon mo 'brug gi mgo can ni/  
'brug gi sgra las [377] brtol ba yin/  
ljang nag sbrul gyi mgo can ni/  
rlung gi sgra las brtol ba yin/  
nag mo skyung gi ka'i mgo can ni/  
bdud kyi sgra las brtol ba yin/  
dkar mo seng ge'i mgo can ni/  
seng ge'i sgra las brtol ba yin/  
dmar mo dred kyi mgo can ni/  
dbal khang gnam sgo can gi sgra las brtol ba yin/  
dmar nag spyang ki'i mgo can ni/  
dgu tshig [tshigs] gzhung gi sgra las brtol ba yin/  
smug nag stag gi mgo can ni/*

me dpung 'bar ba'i sgra las brtol ba yin/  
 ser ljang khyung gi mgo can ni/  
 rnga dang bshang gi sgra las brtol ba yin/  
 sngo ljang chu srin mgo can ni/  
 rgya mtsho klong gi sgra las brtol ba yin/

### Comparative Table of the Nine Daughters

Dga' thang MS	Text A
1. Dragon	1. Dragon
2. Dragon [sic]	2. Snake
3. Head not mentioned	3. Chough
4. Head not mentioned	4. Lion
5. Wolf	5. Red bear ( <i>dred</i> )
6. Tiger	6. Wolf
7. Khyung eagle	7. Tiger
8. Head not mentioned	8. Khyung eagle
9. [missing]	9. Crocodile

For the transliteration of the text of these manuscript folios see above.

Fig. 1

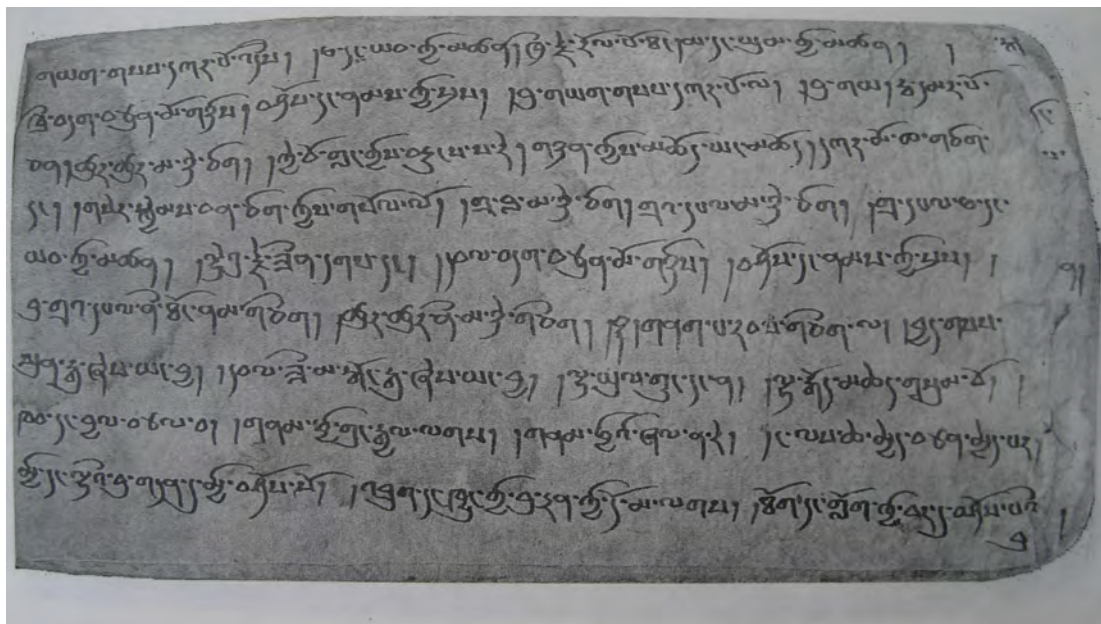


Fig.2

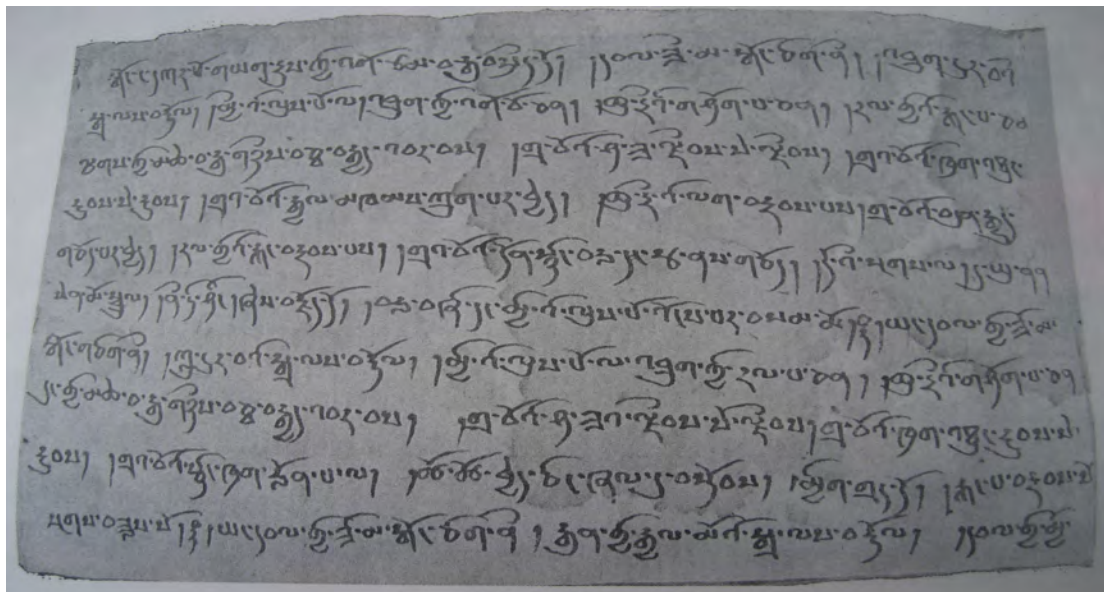


Fig.3

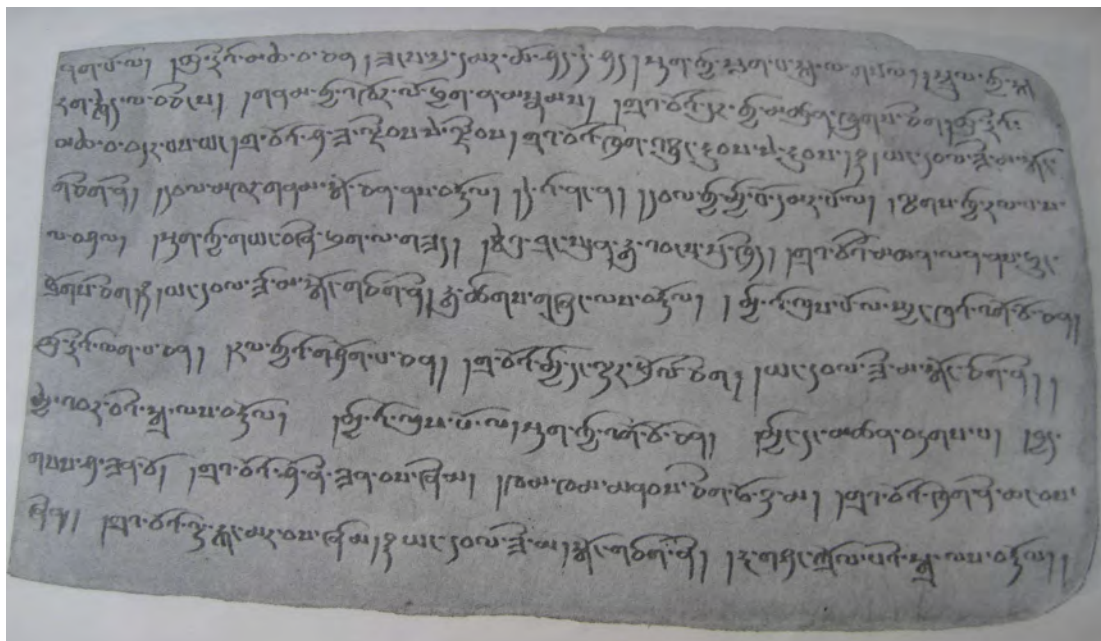
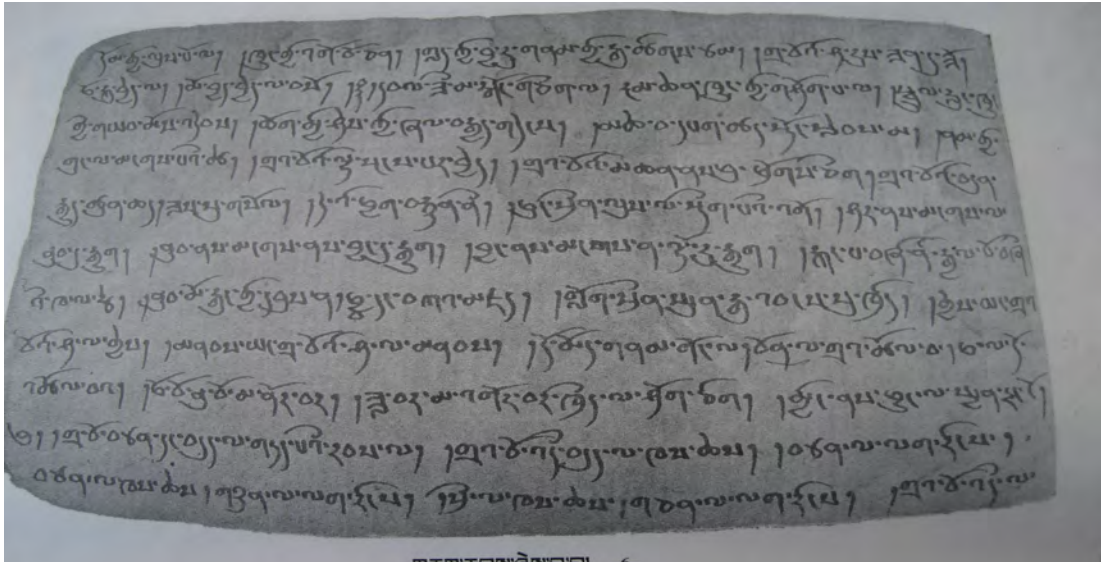




Fig.4



Courtesy of P.W. Patshab

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# The Bon Ka ba nag po and the Rnying ma phur pa tradition

Cathy Cantwell and Rob Mayer<sup>1</sup>

Samten Karmay and others have described the Bon *gter ma* called the 'Black Pillar', or *Ka ba nag po*, as the earliest Bon *phur pa* tantra, according to Bon sources reputedly dating from the 11th century. As we will see, Buddhist sources place it in the 12th century. We have been interested in what we might learn by comparing the *Ka ba nag po* with Buddhist *phur pa* texts from broadly the same period.

Despite some claims to the contrary, the cultural category known as the *phur pa* or *kīla* indisputably has an Indic background.<sup>2</sup> A vast quantity of highly varied *kīla* related materials survive in Indian literatures of all denominations and many genres, spanning many centuries (cf. Mayer: 1991). Perhaps the most direct antecedents of what became the Tibetan *phur pa* tradition can be found in Purāṇas (for example, the *Garuḍapurāṇa*), Śaiva tantras (for example, the *Vīṇāśikhatantra*), and, above all, in Buddhist Vajrayāna traditions such as the *Guhyasamāja*, which has quite a lot to say about Vajrakīla as a personified three-bladed *kīla* with the attributes of a wrathful male deity who removes obstacles (Cantwell & Mayer 2008: 15-31).

Yet there is a very great deal about the *phur pa* tradition as it developed in Tibet that seems indigenously Tibetan, rather than Indian. Above all, the tradition grew hugely in Tibet, achieving a complexity and magnitude undreamed of in India. Numerous and often voluminous tantric scriptures began to appear in post-imperial

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<sup>1</sup> Our grateful thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), whose generous funding made the writing of this paper possible.

<sup>2</sup> Stein spent many years studying the Tibetan *phur pa* tradition, and came to the conclusion that while some kind of concept of the *kīla* had existed in India, the Tibetan *phur pa*'s form and shape were predominantly Tibetan. Thus while Stein (who was not an Indologist) in this way considerably under-estimated the *phur pa*'s Indian background, subsequent scholars over-simplified and over-stated his findings still further, until it was said that the *phur pa* was entirely Tibetan. See Stein, *Annuaire du Collège de France* 1971-72: 499. In fact, it is remarkable how closely the Tibetan *phur pa* reproduces the forms of *kīlas* as established in various Sanskrit Vajrayāna and Śaiva tantras. See Mayer 1991, which was written during the preparation of his PhD at Leiden.

Tibet dedicated to the *phur pa* deity as the central figure in the maṇḍala; yet so far we have discovered no evidence for such tantras in India, where a typical *kīla* text was, as far as we can tell from the surviving literature, generally not much more than a subsidiary or peripheral component of some other deity's maṇḍala.

The early Rnying ma *phur pa* tantras we have read so far were clearly compiled in Tibet, largely by the recombination of smaller text fragments. Their constituent fragments were partly translated from Sanskrit, including some passages found also in *Guhyasamāja* literatures such as the *Pañcakrama*, while others were locally composed, but largely patterned on the Indian model. The overall unifying conception of these early Rnying ma *phur pa* tantras was unambiguously that of Indian Vajrayāna Buddhism, largely conceived in terms of a Mahāyoga genre that included such scriptures famous in Tibet as the *Rgyud gsang ba snying po* and *Thabs kyi zhags pa*. Nevertheless the early Rnying ma *phur pa* literature was augmented by a modest number of indigenous Tibetan categories, so that we can clearly tell from these and other indicators that the texts were compiled in Tibet rather than translated *in toto* from Sanskrit. The tradition also acquired a new take on its Indic name in Tibet: while the proper Sanskrit term is Vajrakīla (*rdo rje phur pa*, *rdo rje phur bu*), from the tenth century until today Tibetans have consistently referred to it when using transliterated Sanskrit rather than Tibetan, as Vajrakīlaya (still with the same Tibetan equivalents, *rdo rje phur pa*, *rdo rje phur bu*). Even that arch Indophile and Sanskritist, the famous Sa skya Paṇḍita Kun dga' rgyal mtshan (1182–1251), used the form Vajrakīlaya rather than Vajrakīla in his famous edition of the short Phur pa tantra that was included in the Kanjur. Hence when referring to the greatly expanded Tibetan branch of the tradition as opposed to the smaller Indian tradition, one should advisedly employ the Tibetan usage Vajrakīlaya, rather than the Indian usage Vajrakīla.

One of our interests is to try to account for the huge expansion of the Vajrakīlaya tradition in Tibet. Dunhuang texts and other early literature suggest that Vajrakīlaya's popularity accelerated in the period known by Tibetan historiography as the *sil bu'i dus* or the 'time of fragments', the politically turbulent period that extended from the mid ninth century Imperial collapse until the late tenth century. Despite the political disintegration, the time of fragments witnessed a remarkable flourishing of religion, and was the period in which a considerable quantity of the Tantric literature nowadays known as Rnying ma pa first came into view. When looked at from the perspective of Buddhist propagation rather than political developments, this period has therefore recently been nick-named the '*bar dar*', or the 'intermediate period of propagation', since it witnessed its own unique and distinctive Tantric dispensation,

yet it lies in between the Imperially sponsored *snga dar* or early period of propagation proper, and the later *phyi dar*, when the Gsar ma tantras were introduced.<sup>3</sup>

The Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot tibétain 44 tells us that the Buddhist authors of this intermediate period text closely associated the Vajrakīlaya tradition with Padmasambhava, attributing to him not only the redaction and ordering of the Vajrakīlaya tantras, but also the transmission of its practice lineages in Tibet, and the appointment of its protective deities at Yang le shod in Nepal. Hence the rise in popularity of Vajrakīlaya seems connected with the rise in popularity of Padmasambhava (Cantwell & Mayer 2008: 41-68). As we have proposed elsewhere (Cantwell & Mayer 2008: 15-31), Vajrakīlaya proved uniquely suited to addressing the ritual needs of post-Imperial Tibet for a number of reasons. It is the only major Buddhist tantric cycle for which the central ritual comprises an elaborate and detailed re-enactment of a blood sacrifice, substituting dough effigies and Buddhist doctrinal categories in place of living victims. The shape of the kīla itself refers meticulously to the Indian *yūpa* or sacrificial stake, and it is likewise identified with the cosmic mountain or Meru. We know from recent archaeological evidence as well as textual

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<sup>3</sup> In discussions of Tibet's conversion to Buddhism, terminological confusion arises through an unreflective use of the popular Tibetan binary of *snga dar* and *phyi dar*. Common Tibetan parlance spoke of two main phases of Buddhist dissemination: a late 8th to mid-9th century imperially sponsored *snga dar*, and a late 10th to 11th century *phyi dar* beginning with the new translations of Smṛtijñānakīrti (10th-11th century, exact dates unknown) and Rin chen bzang po (958-1055). In traditional writing, Rnying ma tantras are usually associated with the Imperial period and counted as *snga dar*. But in modern times this has become a source of confusion, with some authors inaccurately allocating the widespread, general proliferation of the Rnying ma tantras to a *snga dar* understood as late 8th to mid-9th century, and others equally inaccurately allocating it to a *phyi dar* understood as late 10th to 11th century. The evidence found so far suggests that even though such kāpālika-style texts did exist in India at the time (Sanderson 2009: 145ff.), and so might well have been translated into Tibetan in some restricted sense, the widespread proliferation and popularisation of Rnying ma tantras began only after the fall of empire, i.e. after the *snga dar* as often defined, but before the *phyi dar* as often defined. The Rnying ma tantras' widespread proliferation could be said to be located in the *snga dar* only if one understood the *snga dar* to persist all the way up to the beginnings of the late 10th century *phyi dar*, with no break in between; but many do not interpret it that way, instead implying the *snga dar* to be co-terminous only with the late Empire, and wrongly seeing the post-Imperial century and a half as a chaotic 'time of fragments' (*sil bu'i dus*), in which no such major cultural proliferation could have happened. The mistake here is perhaps a failure to understand that religious culture, and especially tantric religious culture, can genuinely flourish in politically chaotic conditions. If we could time-travel back to meet the Tibetan *chos 'byung* authors of the past, we might suggest that out of compassion for scholars of a future age, they instead adopt a three-part system, counting the Rnying ma expansion as a *bar dar*, a third and culturally distinctive period of Buddhist expansion falling between *snga dar* and *phyi dar*, which gathered steam during the *sil bu'i dus*. One should add, learned traditional historiography was in truth frequently far more complex than any simple popular *snga dar-phyi dar* binary. Several authors even employed the term *bar dar*, although as far as we are aware, few if any in the exact sense that we would propose to them. Nonetheless, one should probably count Smṛtijñānakīrti as *phyi dar*, since his doctrines were not typically compiled in Tibet, in the distinctive Rnying ma genre.

sources such as the Tang Annals that blood sacrifice was widespread among the populations of the Tibetan plateau,<sup>4</sup> as also were powerful male mountain deities (Karmay 1998: 432-450; Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 98), perhaps, one might speculate, permitting Vajrakīlaya to serve doubly as a suitable Buddhist substitute. It was also deemed uniquely protective against enmity, encouraging of pure oaths and loyalties, and defender of territorial perimeters, all valuable qualities in times of civil strife.<sup>5</sup>

Several interesting patterns emerged from the comparison of the *Ka ba nag po* with its roughly equivalent Rnying ma counterparts. Above all, it is clear that both represent a reasonably similar combination of elements drawn from Tibetan and foreign cultures, yet they achieve this combination in very different ways and proportions. The upshot is that although the Bon and Rnying ma *phur pa* traditions are very much the same in overall purport and structure, nevertheless they are perceptibly different in the majority of small particulars. Above all, never at any stage do they share identical passages of text, nor do they exactly resemble each other in such crucial ritual minutiae as names of deities, mantras, mudrās, or maṇḍala arrangements. This differentiation has been sustained with sufficient rigour to make it well nigh impossible for any educated readers of the *Ka ba nag po* to be confused even for the duration of a single page about the religious affiliations of the text they are reading.<sup>6</sup>

An investigation into the different ways in which the Rnying ma and Bon *phur pa* texts combine and represent their various foreign and Tibetan cultural categories is very instructive, and has the potential to raise many interesting questions. Most obviously, the Rnying ma texts celebrate Indianness while the Bon do not. Less obviously, Bon pos seem in several ways historically to have been more amenable to eclecticism than the Rnying ma pa. Could it then be that one strand within the complex entity that is Bon represents the heritage of various elements within the Imperial and post-Imperial Tibetan population, who once liked to combine Buddhism with their ancestral religion? And could it be that Buddhist rhetorical rejections of any such eclecticism (other than on the completely unequal basis of subjugation) provided an additional impetus to meld such diverse elements into a more coherent non-Buddhist whole? Our comparative study so far of early Bon and Rnying ma *phur pa* texts certainly does not contradict such a scenario, and could be seen to support it.

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<sup>4</sup> Ample archaeological evidence for blood sacrifice has been turned up in excavations of Tibetan burial mounds (cf. Xu 1996 and Heller, 2013). See now also Tao Tong, 2008. For older textual evidence, see Bushell (1880: 441).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of how and why the *phur pa* tradition became so enormously popular in post-imperial Tibet, see Cantwell & Mayer (2008: 15-31).

<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this, see Cantwell & Mayer (2013).

However, in this paper, we will be taking a slightly different perspective. *Phur pa* is one of the few *yi dams*, and perhaps the most important one, that is fully shared by both Buddhism and G.yung drung Bon under the same name and sharing broadly similar iconography and ritual function.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in their current forms, the Bon and Buddhist *phur pa* traditions contrive to be sharply differentiated, with remarkably little demonstrable intertextuality and each bearing distinctive particular features that serve clearly to differentiate them from one another. In this paper, we will explore some of the still puzzling complexities of the origins of Bon *phur pa*, of how it was in some respects quite distinct from Buddhist *phur pa*, but in other respects dependent upon it.

We will discuss three interconnected strands of evidence: Firstly, the external historical circumstances; secondly the contents of the early Buddhist *phur pa* texts in general, and the particular case of the *Phur bu Myang 'das*; and thirdly, the contents of the early Bon *phur pa* text, the *Ka ba nag po*.

Let us begin with the external historical evidence. Samten Karmay suggested as long ago as 1975, that the Bon *phur pa* tradition was most probably based on a pre-existing older Buddhist *phur pa* tradition, and first introduced into the Bon tradition with Khu tsha zla 'od and his discovery of the *Ka ba nag po* with its associated explanatory texts (Karmay 1975: 198-200). Karmay arrived at the deduction of Buddhist origins in part by considering the nature of the central Vajrakīlaya rite of *sgrol ba*, known as *mokṣa* in Sanskrit, in which the effigy of a victim is killed or liberated in the simulacrum of a sacrificial rite, and their consciousness transferred forcibly to a higher realm. Karmay felt the structure and nature of this rite was typically Indian and unlikely to have originated with Bon. He seems increasingly likely to be correct, because subsequent research has shown that the complex and very specific procedures of this rite do indeed follow a typically Indian set of ideas. It is almost certainly based on an Indian Buddhist creative adaptation of Vedic, Śaiva and Śākta sacrificial cults: for just one among numerous examples, we can cite the Śaiva *Vīṇāśīkhatantra*, where a victim is slain in effigy by stabbing with a triangular *kīla*, exactly as in the Tibetan rite (Cantwell & Mayer 2008: 17-20).

As Karmay further pointed out, Khu tsha zla 'od is believed to have been one of the comparatively few revealers who produced treasures for both the Bon and Rnying ma religions. He is also described as Ku sa sman pa, meaning the famous doctor from Ku

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, 'New Bon' (*bon gsar*) accepts many overt overlaps with Buddhism, but it constitutes a slightly different case, which we are not considering here.

sa. We are not sure what the earliest historical sources are for the identification of Khu tsha zla 'od as a revealer for both religions, or for his being a great doctor, but these important elements seem to be shared by both Bon and Buddhist sources alike.

His fame as a doctor is already mentioned in the biography of the great Rnying ma pa *gter ston* Gu ru Chos dbang (1212-1270) in a comment attributed to Chos dbang's father (Dudjom 1991: 765). It is noteworthy that Gu ru Chos dbang himself claimed to have discovered three cycles of *gter mas* for the Bon tradition (*g.yu rung bon gyi skor gsum*) as well as for Buddhism (Gyatso 1994: 282, 286 note 35; Gu ru Chos dbang Vol II, p.134), and moreover lived in Lho brag, where by some accounts Khu tsha was born, and also not very far from Khu tsha's region of *gter ma* discovery in Spa gro. Khu tsha may have lived not very much earlier than Chos dbang, so it is not impossible that Gu ru Chos dbang's grandparents might have had direct recollections of Khu tsha.

A biography of Khu tsha zla 'od is included in the Buddhist *Rin chen gter mdzod*, where Kong sprul tells us that Ku sa sman pa was a rebirth of Vairocana, born in Lho brag, and was a contemporary of G.yu thog pa (1126–1202), living until the first part of Guru Chos dbang's life, which would seem to put him squarely into the twelfth century, possibly living until the early thirteenth century (Kong sprul 418, 419). Outwardly a doctor and lay mantrin, he achieved accomplishment in lonely places, and became famed as Kun spangs zla 'od and Sman pa padma skyabs (Kong sprul 418, 419). He was a great hidden yogin learned in numerous scriptural transmissions. He opened the treasure face in Spa gro cal gyi brag resembling a fighting scorpion, and withdrew four treasure caskets shaped like bells and so forth. From the bell shaped one he produced Buddhist dharma, from a *gshang* shaped one Bon texts, from a lancet shaped casket, medical texts, and from a divination-table shaped casket, calculation cycles (*gter sgrom dril bu'i dbyibs sogs bzhi byung ba'i dril bu las chos/ gshang las bon/ gtsag cha'i sgrom bu las sman/ gab rtse las rtsis kyi skor rgya cher thon pa grags*. Kong sprul 419). Although famous for these extensive revelations, from the Buddhist side nowadays only the texts and oral transmission for his *Dbang lag gi bcud len* remain extant.<sup>8</sup> Under the Bon rubric however, according to Kong sprul, the revelation of Khu tsha zla 'od's Black Phur pa flourished, and the transmissions of its empowerment, oral transmission, and *sādhana* are still widely disseminated and remain famous for their immense blessings (*bon sde'i gras khu tsha'i phur nag 'gar ston la bka' babs pa da lta'i bar dbang lung bsnyen sgrub kyi rgyun sogs dar zhing byin rlabs che bar grags/ Kong sprul 419*). Kong sprul goes on to claim that Khu tsha zla 'od's treasure discovery was only the first portion of a larger three phased

<sup>8</sup> For this *bcud len*, see Kun spangs zla 'od.



deposit, which secondarily yielded the famous *Dkon mchog spyi'i 'dus* of 'Ja' tshon snying po (1585-1656) and finally the *Rtsa gsum gtso bsdus spyi 'dus snying thig* of Mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820-1892) himself.<sup>9</sup> Kong sprul also mentions a controversy as to whether Khu tsha zla 'od was the same person as G.yu thog yon tan mgon po, but we need not go into that here.

Kong sprul was not the only *ris med pa* to revere Khu tsha zla 'od: Mkhyen brtse dbang po claimed to be his reincarnation, so that depictions of Khu tsha zla 'od appear on lineage drawings and paintings of the Mkhyen brtse tradition. Thus Khu tsha zla 'od features in the Rnying ma liturgical lineage supplications of the latter. The story concerning the mystical connection with 'Ja' tshon snying po looks rather like a creation of later times, perhaps a *ris med* gesture of support to the eighteenth century movement of New Bon, and what the *ris med pas* probably saw as the constructive sentiments expressed in Kun sgrol grags pa's (b. 1700) identification of himself as an emanation of the great seventeenth century Rnying ma *gter ston*.

It appears that no full length Bon biography of Khu tsha zla 'od survives, but short passages on his life exist elsewhere in the Bon literature.<sup>10</sup> We have not yet had the opportunity to consult any of these fragmentary Bon sources on Khu tsha zla 'od. Dan Martin has read some, and he reports that Bon sources date his birth to 1024, which is a good deal earlier than the Buddhist dates.<sup>11</sup> However, Matthew Kapstein has recently pointed out that Khu tsha adopts in his *Rdzogs chen* commentary *Mkhas pa mi bzhi'i 'grel pa* the system of logic not current in Tibet before its introduction by Rngog Blo ldan shes rab (1059-1109). This consideration would seem to make the dates from the Bon sources too early, while making the later Buddhist dates seem quite plausible (Kapstein 2009).

Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung, the learned abbot of Triten Norbutse Monastery in Kathmandu, has also read a number of fragmentary sources on Khu tsha. From an

<sup>9</sup> Kong sprul, *ibid.* 419: *bla rdzogs thugs gsum gyi nang nas yang zab dkon mchog spyi 'dus la gter kha snga bar phyi gsum byung ba'i snga ma rtsa gsum rigs bsdus spyi spungs chen mo gter chen 'di nyid kyis spyen drangs pa'i chos skor rgya cher bzhus pa las snying po tsam zhig rje bla ma padma 'od gsal mdo sngags gling pa la yang gter gyi tshul du bka' babs/ bar pa 'ja' tshon las 'phro gling pa'i dkon mchog spyi 'dus zhes rtsa gsum gnas bsgyur gyi skor ring brgyud dang nye brgyud las gsan cing/ phyi ma rtsa gsum gtso bsdus spyi 'dus snying thig gnas chen padma shel ri nas shog ser dngos su byon pa* (Note that *gter chen 'di nyid* in this passage refers to Khu tsha, who has been discussed in the text directly above.)

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication, Ven. Tenpa Yungdrung, 18th August 2011, Shenten Dargyé Ling, Blou, France. Tenpa Yungdrung informed us that while no dedicated biography survives, biographical passages occur in works describing how the Bon treasures were discovered.

<sup>11</sup> Personal communication, 4 June 2010. He cites as his source the preface to *Khu tsha Zla 'od, Phur pa Sgrub Skor — Dbal phur Nag po'i Rgyud las Spyid Don Nyi shu rtsa lnga'i Sgrub pa Las Tshogs bcas kyi Gsung Pod*, Sherab Wangyal, TBMC (Dolanji 1972).

interview with him, we understand that the Bon traditions agree that Khu tsha revealed treasures for the Buddhists as well as for the Bon.<sup>12</sup> They likewise agree that he was a famous doctor, and revealed medical texts. They say that after revealing his *phur pa* treasures, Khu tsha zla 'od gave the caskets containing it to Gar ston Khro rgyal. They add that he also discovered a famous set of ten magnificent material *phur pas*, kept for centuries at the Bon monastery of Stag bro sa in Kongpo. One of these *phur pas* was eventually transferred as part of a tribute payment to the Dge lugs monastery of Sera, where it survives to this day as the famous Sera *phur pa* that is shown to the public in an annual blessing ceremony. However, we understand that the G.yung drung Bon sources make no mention of any special spiritual connection between Khu tsha zla 'od's treasures and those of 'Ja' tshon snying po or Mkhyen brtse dbang po.

We are not sure what conclusions to draw from these biographical details. From the start, there nearly always seems to have been some tendencies within Bon which enjoyed closer ties with the Rnying ma pa. In the early period there were the Bsgrags pa Bon traditions as described by Anne-Marie Blondeau, and those connected to the Rma clan that Henk Blezer has written about (for a discussion of both, see Blezer, 2013). As we have seen, the famous Guru Chos dbang, one of the most seminal figures in early Rnying ma history, was also apparently a Bon *gter ston* and lineage holder (Gyatso 1994: 280-282, 286 notes 34 and 35). Later on, in the fourteenth century, there was Sprul sku Blo ldan (b. 1360), and a hundred years after him, Bstan gnyis gling pa G.yung drung Tshe dbang rgyal po (1480-1535) (Achard 2008: xxi). The famous early modern figure Shar rdza bkra shis rgyal mtshan likewise had strong connections with the Rnying ma pa (ibid). So the New Bon luminaries Sangs rgyas gling pa and Kun grol grags pa who are so famous for their close links to Padmasambhava and the Rnying ma pa need not be seen as unparalleled in Bon history, either ancient or modern. Nevertheless, it is not yet very clear to us how exactly the question of Khu tsha zla 'od's dual affiliation has been envisaged by either tradition. Did he simply happen to reveal medical and alchemical texts useful for both traditions but only practise Bon as his spiritual practice? Or did he, like Gu ru Chos dbang, seemingly practise both traditions separately, without mixing them? Or, despite the contrary evidence from the *Ka ba nag po*, did he even envisage some kind of syncretism?

If a complete understanding of Khu tsha zla 'od's innermost intentions remains elusive, the internal evidence of some early Tibetan *phur pa* texts still survives. Let us therefore turn to the texts themselves to look at what evidence they might bring of the

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<sup>12</sup> 18th August, 2011. Shenten Dargyé Ling, Blou, France.

early relationships between the Bon and Rnying ma *phur pa* traditions. In this paper, we cannot consider this question in all its wider ramifications, which will have to await a subsequent paper. Rather, we will focus on one particular source that has come to our attention in recent years. The *Phur bu mya ngan las 'das pa'i rgyud chen po* or the *Kīlaya Nirvāṇa Tantra* (henceforth, *Phur bu myang 'das*), is a famous Rnying ma canonical tantra long accepted as a fundamental source for both Rnying ma and Sa skya *phur pa* traditions. We have good reason to believe it is old because a text by this name is anathematized as a Tibetan-fabricated apocryphon by Zhi ba 'od in his polemic of 1092. It seems to have particularly annoyed Zhi ba 'od, because he puts it at the very top of his long list of *Phur pa* tantras to be shunned (Karmay 1998: 17-41). Judging from its extant versions, we can identify at least one reason why he might have anathematized it: the *Phur bu myang 'das*'s chapter nineteen contains a substantial section which looks as though it might be non-Indic, and even Bon. Although starting out with a conventional enough brief description of the Buddhist *khro bo bcu*, or Ten Wrathful Deities, chapter nineteen then moves on to a somewhat longer account of the rituals and activities of the *gze ma* (Cantwell & Mayer 2007: 196-203). The *gze ma* as a type of wrathful goddess are a well known hallmark of what John Bellezza usefully terms the lamaistic Bon tradition (Bellezza 2013: 5), but are also amply attested in the *Gnag rabs*, a text from the Dga'-thang bum-pa collection often said to be of old, pre-lamaistic provenance (Karmay 2009). In the lamaistic Bon *phur pa* tradition, the term *gze ma* is used not merely for a group of protective goddesses, but for a central group of emanations of the principal Ten Wrathful Deities of the maṇḍala (which are themselves a parallel yet differently named and differently appearing set from the Buddhist group of ten). Yet as far as we currently know, the term *gze ma* occurs not at all in the Rnying ma *phur pa* sādhana and commentarial tradition, nor have we so far encountered it in any other Rnying ma *phur pa* tantras, nor indeed in any other Rnying ma literature of any kind.<sup>13</sup> Much of this chapter nineteen has now also developed into a major grammatical crux, incoherent and stubbornly resistant to resolution, as sometimes happens when the sense of the text being copied is more than usually opaque to its copyists.

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<sup>13</sup> Although not directly pertinent to the topics in hand, it might be worth noting that the *gze ma* category raises further questions. Henk Blezer has argued at length that the *gze ma* are a Tibetan or Inner-Asian type of goddess, and not Indic-derived (see Blezer 2000: 117-178). Nevertheless, and we do not disagree with this in general, but in the specific Bon *phur pa* maṇḍala of 'Brug gsas chem pa, as indicated above the *gze ma* very closely parallel the *'phra men ma* of the Rnying ma *phur pa* maṇḍalas. Are then the *gze ma* as depicted in these particular Bon *phur pa* texts the exception to this rule, or are in fact the Rnying ma *'phra men ma* Tibetan or Inner-Asian influenced?

While the first part of the chapter seems to refer to the *gze ma* as a ritual implement, perhaps some kind of tripod, or perhaps more likely as a description of the *phur bu* itself, the passage seems to continue by describing *gze ma* as wrathful messenger deities, sometimes using language that can often be associated with the wrathful Rnying ma *phur pa* protectresses, such as 'three-legged' and 'iron' (Cantwell & Mayer 2007: 27-28, 81, 197-202). Yet these 'three-legged' and 'iron' protectresses of Buddhist *phur pa* traditions such as Shwa na (whose mounts can have nine heads) themselves seem to have a non Indic background, and similar deities are found, for example, in the *gnag rabs* text from the Dga'-thang bum-pa collection (Bellezza, forthcoming). However the Rnying ma scholars and lamas we consulted could not make any sense of the occurrences of the term *gze ma* in this text, and they did not seem to have much idea at all of what *gze ma* might be, either as ritual implement or as deity.

One possibility is that this chapter might describe a long-forgotten ritual, written at a distant time when Buddhists and Bon alike employed the indigenous term *gze ma* in their various ways. Another possibility, perhaps less likely but not out of the question, is that it might represent a garbled version of an originally Bon composition, lost as it were in translation and redaction from the Bon idiom to the Rnying ma. We cannot yet arrive at any firm conclusion because no one has so far been able convincingly to resolve the crux or translate the chapter. All we can say with certainty is that it does repeatedly employ a technical term that we have otherwise seen only in the Bon context, where it is well known. The verses in question might even at one point specify the *gze ma* as fierce female messengers of the herukas who destroy obstacles, which is close to the Bon sense of *gze ma*, yet as far as we currently know, unattested elsewhere in Rnying ma literature under that name.

What are we to make of this occurrence of the term *gze ma* in the Buddhist *Phur bu myang 'das*? Samten Karmay long ago posited the Buddhist origins of the *Phur pa* tradition in Tibet, and a wealth of subsequent evidence has supported his suggestion by demonstrating older Indian antecedents. It would seem then that Vajrakīla began its long trajectory of development in Tibet as an Indian Tantric tradition; yet here in the *Phur bu myang 'das*, we find it has added this non-Indian terminology to its Indian inheritance, which moreover sounds quite Bon-flavoured. We cannot say at what date the *gze ma* terminology was introduced, although we can speculate it might have happened before Zhi ba 'od's vain attempts to ban the *Phur bu myang 'das* in 1092. By Kong sprul's and also Kapstein's calculation, that was probably a few decades before Khu tsha zla 'od's revelation of the first Bon *phur pa* treasures, which of course make numerous and very prominent references to the *gze ma* in many of its tantric cycles,

including *phur pa*. Nevertheless it is highly likely that *gze ma* as a category were already prominent in other Bon cycles by 1092, and perhaps also by the time the *Phur bu myang 'das* was redacted. We can also say that this Bon-flavoured terminology was ignored by later Rnying ma and Sa skya traditions, both of which consistently cite the *Phur bu myang 'das* in their most famous commentaries, yet which find no role for *gze ma* anywhere in those works, nor as far as we can see in any other works.

Literary and historical analysis alike suggest that the early *phur pa* tantras of both traditions are equally the products of the same flourishing post-Imperial culture of indigenous Tibetan tantra writing, which has left as its legacy much of what is now contained in the *Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum*, as well as many other works. The real question is largely one of ascertaining the degree to which in the eleventh and twelfth centuries Rnying ma and Bon perceived themselves as scrupulously segregated separate entities or even rivals, and the degree to which they perceived themselves as differentiated but interacting aspects of a single literary culture.

Until a great deal more work is done, we cannot know how many apparently Bon-flavoured categories might survive elsewhere within the large corpus of Rnying ma tantras, nor how many existed in the past but were edited out later. However, definite signs remain in several of the extant versions of these texts that the Rnying ma pas did not necessarily make huge efforts to domesticate their root tantras through subsequent editing, so that the surviving texts can sometimes be a little rough-hewn in various ways, very much like their Indian counterparts. There might well have been some consciousness among the early Rnying ma pa that a truly authentic Indian-style root tantra was often somewhat rough around the edges, even to the point of including apparently non-Buddhist passages, so long as they are clearly subjugated to a Buddhist purpose. For example, several of the famous Buddhist *Yoganiruttara* tantras that developed in India at around the same time contained blatantly Śaivite passages (Sanderson 2001). So it is not clear how many such passages would have been deemed extraneous and in need of being edited out, and the survival of one apparently non-Buddhist passage in such a prominent and closely-scrutinised text as the *Phur bu myang 'das* is in itself of interest.

The tiny number of Rnying ma tantras looked at so far have occasionally turned out to preserve passages of a clearly Tibetan provenance, sometimes with little or no attempt to conceal them. An editor's note to one early Rnying ma tantra in the prestigious Sde dge canonical edition goes so far as to explicitly advise against making any change to a *mantroddhāra* that offers unmistakeable evidence of Tibetan origins,

despite the fact that such *mantroddhāras* had long been seized upon with some hostility by critics of the Rnying ma pa (Mayer 1996: 135-147). However, most of such Tibetan originated passages comprise categories that are nevertheless unambiguously Buddhist, whether by origin or by adaptation, such as the *mantroddhāras*, or descriptions of deities tamed by Padmasambhava in Tibet. There are also Tibetan deities accepted by both Buddhists and Bon, such as the 'go ba'i lha lnga; local plants with ritual use, such as *mtshe*; Bon-originated rites, such as the separation of the good spirits from the victim before the rite of *sgrol ba*; or material terms such as (*gnam lcags*) *ur mo* which, although laid claim to by later Zhang-zhung lexicons, merely designates meteoric iron.<sup>14</sup> Chapter nineteen of the *Phur bu myang 'das* is the most likely candidate that we have found so far within the Rnying ma *phur pa* tantras that might look specifically or exclusively Bon-flavoured, something not elsewhere accepted by Buddhism, as opposed to merely Tibetan or Bon in origin but widely accepted by Buddhists.

By contrast, our third source of evidence, the *Bon Ka ba nag po*, at least in the form that we now have it, is immaculately conceived and executed, and there is nothing rough-hewn about it at all. It is conceptually complex, doctrinally sophisticated, ritually and iconographically detailed, and in all respects finely structured and arranged. Unfortunately, we have no way of knowing if its original form in the eleventh century was similar to the beautiful well-polished one we have today, and this lack of text-critical certainty lends an unwelcome but unavoidable speculative edge to some of what we are going to say next.

As we have already mentioned, historical evidence suggests that the Buddhist *kīla* or *phur pa* tradition precedes the Bon *phur pa* tradition. We have also mentioned that the *Ka ba nag po* is considered probably the earliest of the Bon *phur pa* texts. The implication is that it could have had comparatively little textual precedent in Bon, even if many of the ritual components from which it was compiled may already have been established. If the textual tradition was largely unprecedented, and if the probably twelfth century redaction of the *Ka ba nag po* resembled the extant versions to any great degree, then one must conclude that the Bon *phur pa* tradition was born, like the

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<sup>14</sup> The term (*gnam lcags*) *ur mo* occurs in distinctly parallel contexts in both Bon and Rnying ma tantric cultures, where it can be found in the *dam tshig* (*samaya*) sections of several Bon and Rnying ma sources alike (for instance, the *Ka ba nag po* Chapter 22; the 'Bum nag early Buddhist Phur pa commentary, Bdud 'joms *bka'* ma edition Volume Tha: 533.1; Gangtok edition: 213.3-4). However, the Bon claim the term *ur mo* to be of particularly Zhang zhung origin (*A Lexicon of Zhangzhung and Bonpo Terms*, p.298). Yet in indicating a type of meteoric iron, which is seemingly a more neutral category than *gze ma*, it might not be so specifically associated with Bon.

mythical garuḍa, fully formed and completely mature from the very start. In other words, if the original form of the *Ka ba nag po* resembles the form we have today, and if it is indeed amongst the earliest of Bon *phur pa* texts, then this leaves us with little evidence for a slow build up or development of the Bon *phur pa* tradition from simpler beginnings to a more complex maturity, at least in its textual form.

Yet the text we currently have is not in any way whatsoever merely a copy of a Rnying ma *phur pa* tantra. We do not find the Buddhist names simply changed into Bon names, in an act of plagiarism that could have been achieved by anyone. On the contrary, its constituent parts and a great many of its deities are drawn very considerably from indigenous Tibetan religion, a great many of which are attested in the dGa' thang Bum pa texts. It thus constitutes a truly comprehensive, painstaking and complex reworking and re-imagining of the entire gamut of Rnying ma *phur pa* doctrines to produce an entirely new *phur pa* tradition found nowhere else, but one that is now composed to considerable degree of adapted elements of the indigenous religion. It is so thoroughly reworked that, as we have argued elsewhere (Cantwell and Mayer 2013: 95-98), it reveals no explicit trace whatsoever of lemmata, pericopes or text fragments taken directly from any known Buddhist work: everything has been thoroughly reworked, re-imagined, and re-expressed anew. We are reminded of the words of David Snellgrove in his pioneering work of 1967, when he writes that the greater part of Bon literature "would seem to have been absorbed through learning and then retold, and this is not just plagiarism" (1980[1967]: 12). In this respect we consider the *Ka ba nag po* something of a literary *tour de force*, combining a deep and subtle doctrinal understanding with a brilliant and original visionary imagination. As far as we can judge from its literary coherence, although it no doubt embodies numerous already existent tantric categories, it could not have been created to any great degree by merging together some existing fragments of text, which is the way some Buddhist *phur pa* tantras were compiled.

What is significant for this discussion is that it seems to bear witness to a literary imagination working from the inside, an authorship with an exceptionally complete understanding of the ritual, doctrinal, and contemplative principles of the existing Tibetan *phur pa* tradition, which then laboriously recreates the entire system anew, using numerous indigenous building blocks. The high level of insider knowledge is revealed at every turn: the complex and subtle imagery and arrangement of *phur pa* maṇḍalas and deities, the rites of *sgrol ba* or forcible liberation, the subsidiary rites, and so on. Only extremely learned insiders could have produced it, a person or persons with a deep and comprehensive understanding of the already existent Tibetan *phur pa*

tradition, who are here creating an entirely novel expression of it, but necessarily from the inside out. Such a re-creation is no doubt on a literary continuum with the revelations of the many Rnying ma treasure revealers who likewise re-imagined new *gter ma* versions of *phur pa*; but here the re-imagining is considerably more comprehensive and pervades every minute aspect of the text, rather than just a few details.

Once again then this might suggest that the earliest Bon traditions had enough close points of contact with Rnying ma for such a deep level of cultural transfer to have actually taken place, when someone so very deeply versed in the Tibetan *phur pa* tradition, which was initially Buddhist and Rnying ma, produced for the first time a *phur pa* tantra in the idiom of Bon. Unless, of course, we are to find after subjecting it to more thorough text-critical analysis, that the received *Ka ba nag po* text has evolved considerably over time, and that its original nature was something much less informed by an interior view of Buddhism than our hypothesis currently assumes! Until the early Bon texts such as the *Ka ba nag po* receive the level of textual scholarship they so obviously require, much of what has so far been said about them will remain fraught with uncertainty.

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# Notes on the history of Bon and the Ye shes monastery in Nyag rong, Sichuan

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Nyag rong stands out as an island of high peaks and craggy narrow valleys emerging from the rolling grassy knolls of Dkar mdzes. It is a natural fortress where its inhabitants have preferred to establish their villages on the top of those mountains and ridges which offered pasturage and arable fields for early settlers. The remoteness and difficulty of access made this an excellent place of refuge. It is not surprising to find Bonpos among the population, a once overwhelming majority in Tibet, now a religious minority found predominantly in remote areas or along Tibet's former frontiers where the authority of the then Central government was weak.

Nyag rong was not the first place where Bon was established in Khams. Some of the oldest sites, still operating, are to be found in Rgyal rong (Chinese: Jinchuan 金川) where the monastery of G.yung drung Lha steng (cf. Karmay & Nagano 2003: 556-559) claims 1,800 years of history (not without interruption). Zhou Xiyin mentions that Rtse drug in Steng chen (cf. Karmay & Nagano 2003: 181-189) has 1,300 years of history and Sgur skyang Monastery (*Guxiang shi* 苟象寺, cf. Karmay & Nagano 2003: 589-593) in Mdzod dge 1,700 years (Zhou 1995: 102). Although these dates are not confirmed, Bonpos seemed to have been present in these regions of Khams since at least the 11th century<sup>1</sup>. Ye shes monastery's pundits claims 1,200 years of history (Rig 'dzin Nyi ma 2004: 65).

Local oral history associates the coming of the first Bonpo masters with the persecution of Bon by emperor Khri srong Lde btsan at the end of the 8th century (Rig 'dzin Nyi ma 2004: 60). One such character is credited with the founding of the first temple (*lha khang*) in the Gong shod valley where Ye shes monastery is located. Me Nyag stag gsas *alias* Nyag rong Rma lha rgod also known as Ma gsas lha rgod (Rig 'dzin Nyi ma 2004: 64), established a line of hereditary Bonpo priests which received the local

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<sup>1</sup> The Sgur skyang as a temple if not as a monastery appears to have been founded just before the Rab byung period which started in 1027. See Karmay & Nagano (2003: 589).

ruler's support and formed exogamous disciples who later brought back G.yas ru dben sa kha's practices and ordination and much later those from Sman ri. The name of the monastery was given in honour of the son of Rma lha rgod, Nam mkha' Ye shes, who won the support of the Klu rgyal chiefs for three generations (Rig 'dzin Nyi ma 2004: 65-66).

The Xinlong Prefecture Gazetteer (*Xinlong xianzhi*) mentions that a certain Gsangs bdag Nam kha' ye shes taught Bon in the vicinity of Ye shes monastery before 983. He had secured the support of Klu rgyal (*Lejia* 勒加) in 958 (*Xinlong xianzhi* 321). If this latter Nam mkha' Ye shes is the same as the son of Rma lha rgod above and the date is correct, then the coming of his father is not linked to the persecution of Bon during the reign of Khri srong btsan but rather to the period of disunity following the collapse of the empire.

The first Bka' rgyud bla ma to come to Xinlong was Richa Guoba (日察过巴 Rin chen gon po?) in the year 1253. In 1268, Zhuogenqipa (卓根其帕 'Gro mgon khrid pa?) a disciple of 'Gro mgon chos rgyal Phags pa (1235–1280) was recorded as the first Sa skya master in the area (Wang Kaidui 179). No clear dates have been put forward regarding the first Rnying ma pa to visit the area. This omission is not surprising since Bonpos in the past either practiced also as Rnying ma masters or were recorded as Rnying ma masters by later followers. Up to recently, some Bonpo lamas were invited to Nyag rong Rnying ma monasteries to perform Buddhist rites. One contemporary master, A la Bon sgya (Bon brgya Dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho, b. 1935) in Reb gong, has a Rnying ma chapel on the grounds of his Bonpo monastery and confers empowerments and teachings of the Rnying ma lineage. History has shown that it is not abnormal to see a Bonpo master belonging to a Buddhist Rnying ma lineage and having a Buddhist name.<sup>2</sup>

By the early 13th century, Nyag rong was already busy with established religious masters who, together with their families, contributed to the development of the social, political, and cultural spheres of its society. Several names recur prominently in the local Bonpo folklore. The Su la, Khyung po and the Khod spungs families are credited with the establishment of several local Bonpo monasteries throughout history. Members of these lineages are still very much present and have been instrumental in the rebuilding of monasteries and the education of the next generation of practitioners and masters. There are quite a few families that today claim

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<sup>2</sup> Such was the case of Bde chen Gling pa (see Achard 2004) as well as Tshul khriims mchog rgyal alias G.yung drung mchog rgyal (Rin 'dzin Nyi ma 2003: see illustration p. 21) Cf. Cantwell & Mayer in this issue.

to be relatives or descendants of members from these early Bonpo families. Many Bonpo spiritual teachings were (and are still) traceable to local Nyag rong families where teachings and spiritual lineages were handed down through the generations within and between these families.

Khod spungs Blo gros Thogs med (1280-1337) is one of the most famous Bonpo masters of the late 13th - early 14th centuries. His biography credits him with the transmission of practices from the Gshen family through his connection with a member of that lineage, Gshen Rgyal ba 'od zer, with whom he conducted long retreats at Brag dben hermitage in the mountains (Karmay & Nagano 2003: 439). He is also important as a treasure-text discoverer, a trend that gained importance in Nyag rong in the 18th century with the coming of Sangs rgyas gling pa (b. 1705) to the region and the 'discoveries' of Gsangs sngags gling pa (b. 1864) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Blo gros Thogs med is credited with writing two volumes of 'revelatory texts' (*snyan rgyud*) included in the Bon Canon (*bka' gyur*). These have been compiled under the title of Khod po Bskal bzang and are divided in twenty-six chapters.<sup>3</sup> He spread his lineage and teachings throughout Khams. For instance, he is credited with the founding a monastery in Rta'u, the 'Ong gong dgon in Lcang log sna. He also performed rituals to 'open' spiritual doors on sacred mountain in the region (Karmay & Nagano 2003: 464-5). A son of Blo gros Thogs med, Rnam dag tshug phud is credited with bringing to Nyag rong the Bon vinaya from G.yas ru dben sa kha monastery in Central Tibet.<sup>4</sup> His descendants studied at Sman ri and brought further practices and teachings to Nyag rong.

The Su la lineage members have intermarried with descendants of Blo gros thogs med and its history as well as its teachings and practices are intertwined with those of the Khod spungs lineage. Su la Bskal bzang grags pa is the current head of the Su la lineage and travels throughout the Prefecture and abroad to transmit the heritage of his lineage.<sup>5</sup> Former masters of Ye shes monastery were either members of the Khod spungs, Su la, Bya btang lineages or recognized as reincarnation of one of them. Such

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<sup>3</sup> Volumes Cha and Ja (6,7) of *Nyi ma bstan 'dzin's* Index and texts in the section 12 of the Mdo Section (121-122) in Martin et al. (88). These revelatory texts were allegedly transmitted orally, possibly in a vision, from Khod spung Dran pa Nam mkha' (fl. late 8th century).

<sup>4</sup> On this monastery see Karmay & Nagano 2003: 29, 44, 330, 374, 399, 529.

<sup>5</sup> See his *Dpra sras g.yung drung dbang rgyal gyi gsung rtsom thor bu bzugs* which includes sections here and there on his family lineage and history.

was the case with the late G.yung drung bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (*alias* A g.yung bla ma 1923-1997), the sprul sku of Bya btang Dri med 'od zer (fl. late 19th early 20th c.).<sup>6</sup>

Thus, from the 13th century, missionary activities and exchanges with other Bonpo institution in Central Tibet and other regions of Khams were already having their effects in Nyag rong despite its remoteness. The religious institutions of Nyag rong were not disconnected from the Greater Tibet scene. However, to this day, despite claims of unbroken transmission of teachings and practices, and besides Sman ri's syncretic and formulated G.yung drung Bon, it is difficult to find actual practices which have not been mixed with ones from the latter school. Despite uninterrupted practice of 'old' or orthodox gter ma cycles (Treasure Texts rites) such as Ma rgyud, Phur pa, Ge khod, Stag la me 'bar and others, with centuries of addendum, lost records and replacement of older practices and beliefs by trendier ones, it is next to impossible to identify 13th century practices in Nyag rong on the basis of later ones. However, many institutions as old as those in Nyag rong, claim to have kept ancient practices which are generally referred to as "tantric" or "magic" *gto rgyud*. There are a number of texts kept in Bonpo families' hereditary cache of manuscripts considered *gto rgyud* and some I have been able to see contained "magic" recipes for cures and spells to accomplish magical feats. The only study on such Tibetan grimoires so far remains that of Bryan Cuevas on Mi phams' *Be'u 'bum* (*Calf's Nipple*) in which the author describes the various spells, charms and amulets to use in order to attain as varied results as: growing flowers, protection against various animals and spirits, invisibility, suppressing plagues and other foes, attaining clear vision, clairvoyance, mirror divination, etc. The number of these smaller magical rites in the *Be'u 'bum* totals about 225 and the nature of the sources of the spells, their composition, the attributions of these rites as well as the iconographic details point to a collection of material from varying sources (Cuevas 2009: 165-186). The many rites considered as most 'ancient' and believed to predate Sman ri are rarely if ever practiced. It is actually difficult to meet anyone who has ever practiced them or knows how to. The lack of transmission from one generation to another due to political upheaval during the Sino-Tibetan War as well as during the Cultural Revolution may account for this. But the growing number of lamas educated according to the Sman ri norm over the last half-century might also be a factor which discouraged the practice of other forms of Bon. The situation might be a bit different in other parts of the Tibetan world such as in Dolpo and other areas where Bonpos have been thriving without much opposition. In general, these practices are difficult to find

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<sup>6</sup> A g.yung bla ma was also recognized as a reincarnation of the famous Bonpo siddha, Thung byung thugs chen. Oral communication from Rin 'dzin Nyi ma as well as from other monks of Ye shes dgon pa (2004-2007).

and to have a demonstration, simply because fieldwork as well as access to these areas have been enabled (with periodical breaks) only since the early 1990s. Research on these areas is, unfortunately, only in its incipient stage.

### New Treasure phenomena

The ‘spiritual treasure’ (*gter ma*) phenomenon in Bon is not new. A major aspect of this tradition and its culture hinges on the discovery of sacred texts by either unsuspecting passers-by (even thieves!) or by early masters who reconnected with the intent of the practices and renewed their transmissions. The first two biographies of Ston pa Gshen rab, the *Mdo 'dus*<sup>7</sup> and the *Gzer mig* are 10-11th centuries examples. The most notorious of the early Bon re-discoverers is no doubt Gshen chen Glu dga'.<sup>8</sup> Khod spungs Blo gros thogs med was possibly the first treasure revealer in Nyag rong. The 18th century was a demarcating point for Bonpos in regards to this treasure tradition. With the discoveries of Rtse drug pa Sangs rgyas gling pa (b. 1705), Bon began to keep pace with other contemporary movements such as that of the Rnying ma pa. The most important change was probably in the nature of these rediscoveries; they began to show an increased syncretism with the Buddhism of the time. In addition, the character of treasure text discoverers and of the manners of discoveries also changed. *Gter ston* were no longer accidental discoverers but rather prophesized individuals much like in the Rnying ma pa's system. These Bonpo lamas rediscovered ancient teachings hidden in symbolic signs and mystical markings through remembering them or just discovering them in the recess of their karmic minds. The results were shorter liturgical manuals with more concise rites of a greater variety which included Buddhist names of masters, of deities and methods which had been exclusively Buddhist or were altogether new to both Bon and Buddhism.<sup>9</sup>

The greatest treasure text revealer of Nyag rong was Gsangs sngags gling pa (b. 1864) of Dbal khyung monastery. Elsewhere I have discussed how this charismatic individual, through the propagation of his teachings and rediscovered texts as well as through his unceasing travels and association with noted scholars was able, among other things, to transform his small and forgotten temple into a major pilgrimage site

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<sup>7</sup> See the new study of Kalsang Gurung on this text: “The Emergence of a Myth: In search of the origins of the life story of Shenrab Miwo, the founder of Bon.” PhD dissertation, Leiden University, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> For a study on Gshen chen, see Martin (2001).

<sup>9</sup> See Achard (2004) for another example of Bonpo – Rnying ma syncretism.



(des Jardins 2012). Gsangs sgnags gling pa started a trend in Nyag rong; during and after him, this region saw many new local masters transmitting their treasure texts. Gsangs sgnags gling pa was also known for teaching the technique of treasure discovery (des Jardins 2012). In doing so, he propagated and legitimized the cycles generated by this New Treasure movement which other Bonpo monastic institutions linked with Sman ri and G.yung drung gling in Central Tibet had opposed. Gter yum Dbang gi sgrol ma (1868-1927?), the consort of Gsangs sgnags gling pa, discovered a number of teachings, first under the guidance of her master-consort and later after his passing (Rossi 2008: 371-378).

One of the most recent Bonpo gter ston of Ye shes monastery was Thugs rje gling pa *alias* Ri kho (d. 1980s), son of Khyung po Nyi ma rgyal mtshan (fl. 1909) who was a disciple of Shar dza pa Bkra shis rgyal mtshan (1858-1934)<sup>10</sup>. This latter master, friend and colleague of Gsang sngags gling pa, was probably one of the most important Bonpo masters of the last century. He was a Bonpo luminary and composed several important treatise on the Great Perfection systems of Bon, as well as on various topics relating to doctrine, history, philosophy, vinaya, ritual practices and the tantric systems.<sup>11</sup> His support of Gsangs sgnags gling pa with his validation of the latter's Treasure discoveries through his writings and practices at his hermitage further reinforced the trend.<sup>12</sup> Shar dza pa was a practitioner of both old treasure as well as the new wave of teachings spread by his friend.

Travel was the preferred method of spreading Bon beliefs as well as establishing one's credential and creating a network of support. Shar dza pa visited Nyag rong and particularly Ye shes monastery during the Dgon gsar monks' invasion and destruction of Bonpo monasteries of the region in 1902 (Achard 2008: 60). His visit of Dbal khyung, Ye shes and other centres in Nyag rong must have been an important moment for legitimating local masters and specially for the master's disciples at their respective monasteries.

Shar dza rinpoche's first two disciples were Nyag rong pa from Ye shes monastery. Tshul khrim mchog rgyal *alias* Tshul khrim mchog ldan *alias* G.yung drung

<sup>10</sup> Dates for Bkra shis rgyal mtshan have varied. Karmay puts them as 1859-1935 (1972: xv n.2) and the editor of Shar dza pa's *Bka' lung rgya mtsho*, Sprul sku rig 'dzin Nyi ma (b. 1976), puts them at 1858-1933 (1). I follow Achard here for no other reasons than his extensive research on Shar dza's life while compiling the annotated bibliography of this Bonpo luminary. See Achard (2008).

<sup>11</sup> For a biography as well as an annotated catalogue of his Complete Works, see Achard 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Shar dza pa entered Gsang gling, Bde chen gling pa, Kun grold grags pa and other representative of the so-called New Bon movement as orthodox lineage holders of Bon in his *Legs bshad mdzod*. See Karmay 1972: 185-189.

tshul khrim (fl. early 1900s)<sup>13</sup> and his friend, Padma Blo gros (d. 1894)<sup>14</sup>, became Shar dza's disciples in 1893. By a long association with the master, which included travel and retreat, Tshul khrim mchog rgyal was able to acquire a thorough training not only in the old treasure but also in the new treasure tradition, which he brought back to his monastery. Tshul khrim mchog rgyal in time returned to Ye shes dgon where he became one of the abbots and actively participated with Khyung po Nyi ma rgyal mtshan in the enlargement of the monastery's precinct in 1909 by adding a new assembly hall of 12 columns (Karmay & Nagano 2006: 421). In the course of his life, he also built several small retreat abodes in the vicinity of Ye shes dgon. In doing so, he disseminated his master's teachings and contributed to further establishing the eclectic tradition of his monastery. Seng gi sprul sku Rig 'dzin nyi ma (b. 1986), a present day (2013) abbot of Ye shes dgon maintains that the tradition at Ye shes was to always ask visiting masters to give transmission and teachings of their lineages. In doing so, the monastery collects lineages and practices that in turn contribute to the maintenance of the religion as well as to its dissemination. Today, Ye shes monastery maintains an active role in teachings and sending its monks to other important educational institutions.<sup>15</sup> Hence, Ye shes monastery during the time of the late Ayung bla ma (*alias* G.yung drung bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1923-1997) who suffered during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), contributed to the rebuilding of the monastery. We owe to him the first printing of the Bon Bka' 'gyur (Martin et al. 2003: 2). Ayung bla ma sent monks to many different institutions for studies such as the Snang zhig dgon pa in Rnga ba and to Bon brgya Dge legs lhun grub rgya mtsho (mentioned above) in Reb gong. Dge bshes seng gi sprul sku Rig 'dzin nyi ma, a noted writer and traditional scholar on Bon, is a graduate of Snang zhi monastery. The present Rgyal skyabs of Shar dza's hermitage, A 'jigs, is a monk from Ye shes monastery and a graduate from Bon brgya's school.

Ye shes dgon may have been predisposed to eclecticism and syncretism since its beginning. It seems that it was at first a collection of temples or shrine fulfilling different functions or groups since it was called the Valley of temples. It is not certain there was any assembly hall and the state of its original location, just one or two kilometres up river furnishes no traces of large buildings.

<sup>13</sup> See Rig 'dzin Nyi ma's biography : *Bla ma Mchog rgyal gyi rnam thar*. Chengdu 2003.

<sup>14</sup> See Stag bon bla ma. *Pad ma Blo gros kyi rnam thar*. Manuscript. Nyag rong (Xinlong) 2007.

<sup>15</sup> On the new roles of Bonpo monastic institutions such as Ye shes dgon and Snang zhig dgon in the preservation, revitalization and dissemination of Bon in the contemporary world, within and outside the borders of China, see des Jardins 2009.

The monastery was transferred to its present site in 1848 during the reign of Mgon po Rnam rgyal (r. 1836-1865) who conquered much of the territories around Nyag rong for a brief period.<sup>16</sup> Three smaller monasteries or temples were merged and the master Nyag stod Stong ldan mgon po renamed Ye shes as Ye shes bshad sgrub gling that year (Karmay & Nagano 2003: 420-421).

Ye shes dgon's relocation eventually included the construction of two dedicated temples, one to Ma rgyud and the other to Phur pa.<sup>17</sup> Each temple had its own dedicated practices. One Sprul sku was assigned the charge of one temple. Both sat on the two Golden Thrones (*ser khri pa*) in the Assembly Hall and were made the Head abbots of Ye shes monastery. The last two Golden Throne holders of the monastery were G.yung drung bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1922-1996) *alias* Ayung Lama (Ma rgyud lineage) and G.yung drung bdud 'dul (?-1995) (Phur pa lineage). Besides these temples and other minor shrines the rebuilding included the consolidation of three different smaller monasteries (which I was not able to identify).

With the destructions of the Cultural Revolution, all temples were destroyed. The present Assembly Hall (*bsdud khang*) was rebuilt using the remaining walls of the 1909 hall (Karmay & Nagano 2003: 421).

With the rebuilding efforts of the 1980s to the present, as mentioned, the immediate concerns of the heads of Ye shes dgon was to rebuild not only the physical monastery but also to perpetuate the tradition. Efforts included the reprinting and recuperation of written material and the training of younger generation in the face of the rapidly dwindling number of old masters and monks who remembered the practices. Together with remaining Bonpos throughout the Tibetan and Chinese regions, concerted efforts brought back enough of the old material and support to reinitiate the practice of Bon.

At Ye shes monastery, monks were sent to specialize in certain traditions such as that of Sman ri (for Rig 'dzin nyi ma for example), of Bon brgya and others. Certain members of the Ye shes community, however, inherited Nyag rong's past transmissions in both Old treasure texts and New treasure. The younger brother of Ayung bla ma, Skal bzang rgya mtsho *alias* A rgyal bla ma (b. 1939) was the disciple of Dbra ston Bskal bzang bstan pa'i rgyal mtshan (1897-1959), another disciple of Shar dza Bkra shis rgyal mtshan and the author of his biography. Since A rgyal bla ma was younger than A g.yung bla

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<sup>16</sup> On Mgon po Rnam rgyal, see Tsomu.

<sup>17</sup> This information was given to me in 2007 by one of the four abbots of the monastery, G.yung drung bstan 'phel (b. 1931), who lived in the monastery prior to its destruction during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

ma, Dbra ston rinpoche decided to confer on him the transmission of the New Treasure he was holder of. A rgyal became a custodian, so to speak, of these traditions while his elder brother, whose *yi dam* was Ma rgyud, specialized in the Old treasure traditions. Thus, Ye she monastery continues to transmit both, the ‘older treasure’ traditions as well as the ‘new gter ma’.

## Historical lineages and practices

As mentioned above, when one tries to identify the ritual practices that might have been initiated by Ma gsas lha rgyod and the early masters, one is confronted with the same discontinuity of evidence as those encountered when researching the greater history of Bon. That is, among others, a short list of initial masters stretches over a long period of time. This followed by a ‘renewal’ starting in the 10-11th centuries. Then the flourishing of many different traditions from time to time till a seemingly critical mass is attained in the early 18th century which brings forth extensive additions to ‘older treasures’ as well as ‘new treasures’ and further syncretism.

Hence, Gshen chen glu dga’ (996-1035) seemed to have initiated a wave of renewal among the Bonpos with his discoveries.<sup>18</sup> After him, the important canonical texts (i.e. those in the Kangyur catalogues of either Nyi ma bstan ‘dzin (1813-1875) or the ones published by Martin et al or by Keutzer and O’Neill) were added till the end of the 14th century. Some Collected Sayings (*bka’ ‘bum*) have been handed down as writings of early 11th – late 14th century Bonpo masters. Unfortunately, none have yet been the object of study.<sup>19</sup> Later productions appear to consist of commentaries and addenda to rituals but little was added to the Bka’ ‘gyur compilation. Hence, a chronological table of the main identifiable (and datable) compilers, discoverers or recipients of revelatory material (*snyan rgyud*) based on the concise list of the Sman ri Abbot Nyi ma bstan ‘dzin shows eighteen of its twenty-seven individuals belonging to the 10th (four), eight to the 11th, two to the 12th, and five to the 13th centuries. The remaining eight cannot yet be given dates. However, circumstantial evidences from

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<sup>18</sup> See Martin (2001).

<sup>19</sup> The *List of the Bonpo Kanjur skar chag* (10) drawn by Khedup Gyatso of Nyi ma Bstan ‘dzin’s catalog lists seven Collected Sayings. These are: g.Yor po Me dpal (b. 1134); ‘Mkhas mchog dpal chen (b. 1052); Gnyon Tshul khrims rgyal mtshan (b. 1145); Gro mgon Blo gros rgyal mtshan (b. 1198); Dru Rgyal ba g.yung drung (b. 1242); mNyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan (b. 1356); and ‘Gro mgon Bdud rtsi rgyal mtshan (?).

Bonpo chronicles (such as the *Legs bshad mdzod* of Shar dza Bkra shis rgyal mtshan) may indicate that they were contemporaries of masters of the 11th to late 14th century period.

**Chronological list of contributors to the Bonpo Bka' 'gyur**

	<b>Name, <i>aliases</i> and approximate dating</b>	<b>Section, volume in the index of Nyi ma Bstan 'dzin and type of scripture</b>
1.	<b>A tsa ra mi gsum</b> (the Three Acarya ?) <i>alias</i> Ban de mi gsum (fl. 913)	Mdo Section Vol. Ku (61) gter ma; 'Bum Section vols Tsa-Ya (79-86) gter ma, Pi-Nu (105-134) gter ma.
2.	<b>Khro tshang 'brug lha</b> (b. 956)	Mdo Section Vol Dzi (48) gter ma
3.	<b>A tsa ra mi gnyis</b> (fl. 961)	Mdo Section vols Sa, Ci (28, 35) gter ma
4.	<b>Gshen glu dga'</b> (b. 996)	Mdo Section Vols Kha (2) gter ma, Tsi (47) gter ma, Ku-Khu (61-62) gter ma; 'Bum Section vols Ka-Ma (63-78) gter ma, Sems Section Vol Kha (173) gter ma.
5.	<b>Bu 'tsho Srid pa'i rgyal po</b> (early 11th c. Karmay 1972: 170)	Mdo Section vol. I (60) gter ma.
6.	<b>Khu tsha zla 'od</b> (b. 1024)	Mdo Section vols Thi (40) gter ma, Tsi (47) gter ma; Rgyud Section vols Tsa (156) gter ma, Na (165) gter ma, Pa (166) gter ma.
7.	<b>Drang rje btsun pa</b> <i>alias</i> Drang nga ma (fl. late 11th c. ? See Karmay 1972: 165 and 165 n.2)	Mdo Section vols La, Sha (26, 27) gter ma.
8.	<b>Gnyen 'thing Shes rab rdo rje</b> <i>alias</i> Gnyen ma thing (fl. 1067)	Mdo Section vols Ji, Nyi, Ti, Di, Shi, Hi: (36, 37, 38, 39, 41, 57, 59) all gter ma; 'Bum Section Ti, Thi, Ni, U (101, 102, 104, 152) all gter ma.
9.	<b>Gzhod ston Dngos grub grags pa</b> (fl. 1088)	Sems Section vol Ga (174) gter ma.
10.	<b>Rma ston</b> (b. 1092)	Rgyud Section vols Ca, Tsha (158, 171) gter ma.
11.	<b>Gyer mi byi 'od</b> (b. 1096)	Mdo Section Ka (1) Snyan rgyud; Rgyud Section vol Ka (154) Snyan rgyud.

12.	<b>Khyung rgod rtsal</b> <i>alias</i> Dbyil ston He ru ka (b. 1175)	K. 59, Rgyud Section vols Cha (159) part gter ma (for the <i>Dbal gsas ting mur g.yu rtse'i rgyud</i> ) and two texts as dbus gter (for the <i>Dbal gsas drag zlog gi rgyud</i> and the <i>Stong ri tho chen rgyas 'brings sdus gsum</i> ), Pha (167) gter ma, Ma (169) three titles as gter ma ( <i>Stag la'i rgyud</i> , <i>Spu gri dkar po lta ba rdzong phug bstan pa'i rgyud</i> , <i>Mi 'jigs srung ba'i rgyud</i> ) and another three titles as gshen gter gter ma ( <i>Srid rgyal gyi rgyud ba ga glong chen</i> , <i>Ma mo gsang ba yang this kyi rgyud</i> , <i>Ma mo stag ri rong gi rgyud</i> ).
13.	<b>Gu ru Rno rtse</b> (b. 1136)	Rgyud Section vol. Tha (163) (main texts for the Ma rgyud cycle) gter ma
14.	<b>Khod po Blo gros thogs med</b> (1280-1337)	Mdo Section vols Cha, Ja (6, 7) snyan rgyud.
15.	<b>Go sde 'phags pa G.yung drung ye shes</b> <i>alias</i> Dbang ldan Gshen sras lha rje <i>alias</i> Go lde 'Phags pa (fl. before 1310 Karmay 1972 175 n. 1)	Mdo Section Na, Pa, Dzi (12, 13, 49) gter ma.
16.	<b>Skyang 'phags Mu la drung mu</b> (fl. before 1310. Karmay 1972: 172 n. 2)	Mdo Section vol Mi (46) gter me.
17.	<b>Sprul sku blo ldan</b> <i>alias</i> Blo ldan Snying po <i>alias</i> Pad 'byung nam mkha' rin chen (b. 1360)	Mdo Section vols Pha-Ra (14 – 25) snyan rgyud, Ha – Gi (29-34) snyan rgyud, Wi (50) snyan ryud, Shi (57) snyan rgyud for the title: <i>Dge spyod yan lag gsum pa</i> ; Rgyud Section vols Ka (154) snyan rgyud for the title: <i>Dbal gsang ba 'dus pa don gyi rgyud</i> , Da (164) snyan rgyud for two titles: <i>Rig 'dzin 'dus pa thabs chen mkha' yi rgyud</i> and <i>Rig pa khu byug tsa ba'i rgyud</i> , Ba (168) snyan rgyud and only one title on six is ascribed to Blo ldan. It is the <i>Gshen dmar spyi 'dul ba der gshegs 'dus pa'i rgyud rdzu 'phrul dra ba</i> .

18.	<b>Sprul sku khro gnyer</b> (fl. 1386)	Mdo Section vols Nya, Ta (8, 9) as dgongs gter.
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The chronological list which follows was reconstructed from the *List of the Bonpo Kanjur skar chag* drawn by Khedup Gyatso<sup>20</sup> of Nyi ma bstan 'dzin's catalog. The corpus of their contributions follow their names according to the index of Nyi ma bstan 'dzin.

**Undated transmitters presumed to be prior to the beginning of the 15th century**

1.	<b>Mtshan ldan Drung mu ha ra</b> (?)	Mdo Section vols Ngam Ca (4,5) snyan rgyud, Shi (57) snyan rgyud, two titles on five as ascribed to Drung mu: <i>Gna' sdig bshags pa'i sbrul mdo rin chen phreng ba</i> and the <i>Gsang gzungs dga' ba bdo mchog</i> .
2.	<b>Gling gshen Mu la Thogs med</b> (?)	Mdo Section vols Tha, Da, Si (10, 11, 58) all snyan rgyud.
3.	<b>Sham po</b> (?)	Mdo Section vol Thi (40) gter ma, one title on two: <i>Mo sbyong pad ma mun sel gyi mdo</i> .
4.	<b>Gu ru ban chung</b> (?)	Mdo Section vol. Ni (42) gter ma.
5.	<b>Se snyen zhig po</b> (not certain if he is the same as Rgya rong Se gnyen Mu 'od bsnyong pa. See Kvaerne et al 48-49)	Mdo Section vols Zhi-Li (51-56) gter ma.
6.	<b>Lhun grub thogs med</b> (?)	Mdo Section vol. Shi (57) gter ma, one title on five: <i>Skye sgro bcod pa'i mdo</i> .
7.	<b>Gnyan ston Gzhun nu 'bum</b> <i>alias</i> Gnyan ston <i>alias</i> Gnyal ston ( ?)	'Bum Section vols Ki-Nyi, U (93-100, 151) gter ma, Rgyud Section vol Tsa (170) no entry as to which method of provenance the text fall into.

<sup>20</sup> This list was given to me by the late Ayung bla ma in Chengdu in December 1992. Khedup Gyatso. *List of the Bonpo Kanjur dkar chag*. Bonpo monastic Centre. Dolanji, P.O. Ochgat via Solan (H.P.) India. 20.9.1985. 10 pages hand drawn manuscript (30cm X 42cm).

8.	<b>Yum sras gshen gsum (?)</b>	Rgyud Section vols Ja (160) no entry, Nya (161) no entry under one title on five. Only the first, <i>Bdud rtsi ga'u brtsegs pa'i rgyud</i> , is ascribed seemingly to Yum sras. One title, <i>Thabs kyi rgyud</i> , is classified as Dbus gter. Unclear as to which texts are ascribed to Yum sras and which ones are not. Need further research.
9.	<b>Kyu ra rnal 'byor</b> <i>alias</i> Sprul sku Kyu ra Blo gros Rgyal mtshan (?)	Rgyud Section vol. Ba (168) gter ma. Four titles on six: <i>Spyi 'dus rdzas lnga rin chen sgron ma'i rgyud</i> ; <i>mDzad pa skor gsum gyi rgyud</i> ; the <i>Mu la sgron bu rin po che'i phreng ba'i rgyud</i> ; and the <i>Bder gshegs 'dus pa'i khro bo yongs kyi glad don tsa ba'i rgyud</i> .

These tables illustrate how, the seemingly closed Bonpo Canon of today is a collection of 10th century to pre-1500s material. The list above was written by a Sman ri Abbot, Nyi ma bstan 'dzin, whose focus was orthodoxy during a period where the rise of New Bon was widespread in the Khams regions. It has been presumed elsewhere that he edited his index in order to reflect a conservative form of the Bon religion (Martin et al. 2003: 4-5), which was actively propagated by the Sman ri establishment. One could speculate that throughout its existence, Sman ri has sought to dominate this religion doctrinally at least (if not politically).

Ritual texts such as those produced in part and disseminated by Sman ri and its branch institutions are 15th century and later. I would propose that most ritual texts from either Sman ri or the neighbouring Gshen village, which transmitted Gshen chen's legacy as well as important tantric systems such as the Ma rgyud cycles, have received ritual sequences, prayers and miscellaneous ancillary texts which have obscured the 'original' sections. Those, sometimes indicated as 'lore' (*gzhung*), are found throughout the enormous corpus here and there. Tradition considers these lore sections as the original 'received' texts, such as the Phur pa texts discovered by Khu tsha zla 'od in Spa gro or ascribed to the 'original' teachings of famous Bonpo siddha of antiquity such as Stag la Me 'bar, Mi lugs sems legs and others. These later additions to ancient texts appear to indicate a later form of Bon, which was not only influenced by Buddhism but



also, possibly, as a response to the well organized and literate Buddhist traditions which started to dominate Tibet from as early as the 10th century onward. At present, it is uncertain if the purported original lines that constitute the lore (*gzhung*) should be considered as directly stemming, in unbroken lineages, from the Bon of the Imperial (7th-9th century) or Pre-Imperial times. However, the traditions that link present practices and lineages to one of the six original family lineages of Bon (Karmay 1972: 3-14), which date from either the time of Gshen chen glu dga' (996-1035) or shortly after, seem to be historically reliable, but further study is required.

A new conciliatory form of Bon which focused on Dran pa Nam mkha' (8th c.) and his two sons, Tshe dbang rig 'dzin and Pad ma 'Byung gnas (*alias* Padmasambhava) would be as old as the 14th c. if we rely on Bon zhig G.yung drung gling pa *alias* Dor je gling pa (1346-1405) and his Treasure texts of the Tshe dbang bod yul ma cycle (Rambles 2007: 127). Since then, many other texts involving Dran pa Nam mkha' and his two sons have been produced, such as G.yung drung Bstan pa'i rgyal mtsham's (b. 1516) revelation of the Tam 'grin cycle which was bestowed to him from a wisdom Sky-goer (*mkha' gro ma*) during the fifth month of a Fire Dragon year (1556) (des Jardins 2010: 193). The bulk of texts and practices focusing on the Father (Dran pa Nam mkha') and his two sons, however, are the products of the movement started in the 18th century by the Bonpo master from Rtse drug monastery, Sang gyas gling pa (b.1700).

By the beginning of the 18th century, Bonpo communities were isolated socially within the greater core of Buddhist Tibet. According to Rig 'dzin nyi ma of Ye shes monastery, prior to year 2005 Bonpo scholars (*dge bshes*) were relatively scarce on the ground and most Bonpo institutions relied on their own local received ritual and religious traditions. The history of Bonpo temples, monasteries and hermitage was intensely local in nature and the formal conferral of practices through empowerments and transmission had an important measure of oral teachings. These were composed of ritual directives as well as anecdotal history on local lineage holders, local practitioners' lives and religious figure, lay or ordained. Each temple had already well rehearsed liturgies and method of delivering Bon rites. It is difficult to say how much fossilization had taken place but renewal of the tradition must have been important in order to 'keep up' with the times and with the Buddhist competition. Wandering Treasure discoverers such as Nyag rong pa Sangs sngags gling pa became important contributors on the religious scene. For the Bonpos, they must have supplied communities and most importantly, monks and lamas whose bread and butter rely heavily on ritual performance, very relevant means of religious endeavour. The wide popularity of these treasure Texts practices in Khams and in A mdo at the turn of the

1900s supports this. But how much of the ‘old’ gter ma-s were present in the basic core of Bonpo religious practices at that time?

### **Tshul khrims mchog rgyal and his lamas’ lineages**

Evidences, which might permit us to get a clearer picture of the formation and provenance of teachings and practices, are only surfacing in the course of further research. While I was conducting field research at Ye shes monastery in 2006, A rgyal bla ma was kind enough to bring to my attention a corpus of records from Tshul khrims mchog rgyal, the disciple of Shar dza Bskra shis rgyal mtshan and root-master of A g.yung bla ma. The material was composed of 488 folios of hand made papers totalling about 970 pages of hand written notes. It seems that Tshul khrims mchog rgyal kept meticulous records of all the transmissions he received during a large portion of his life. The beauty of many of these, particularly those pertaining to the older treasure tradition, is that he often made distinctions between the various components of the general rites and indicated the provenance of many. I have written on two such instances elsewhere. One focused on the Phur nag tradition (des Jardins, forthcoming) and the other on a New Treasure relating to a unique and dramatic Tam sgrin rite practiced, possibly only, at Ye she dgon now (des Jardins 2010).

These records show us the previously mentioned eclecticism of the Ye shes traditions. Tshul khrims mchog rgyal received the transmission of a vast array of New treasure and Old treasure transmissions from a variety of sources. The study of the lineage transmitters may help shed light on the interconnection between monasteries and regions as well as help understand the ways a given cycle, such as Phur pa for instance, grows through the addition of various rites, parts, prayers and so on. The material is, however, vast and many masters (if not most of them at present) are difficult to clearly identify in place and time. A quick glance at the content however appears to support the supposition that Ye shes monastery did have a corpus of “old” gter ma. Lineage holders in the line leading to Tshul khrims mchog rgyal appear to be former masters of Ye shes. Some of the lines of past masters are shorter. They bifurcate not long before Tshul khrims mchog rgyal to the Sman ri lamas. Does it mean that the provenance of some of these teachings came from Sman ri or that it was just a local lama who went to study or received teachings at Sman ri had his spiritual lineages “renewed” from his contemporary masters at Sman ri? This could be the results of Tshul khrims mchog rgyal’s own wanderings and receiving empowerments he already

received earlier for blessings purposes. We can clearly demarcate the old from the new Bon cycles and the latter appear to outnumber the former.

Below is a sample of the sort of Bonpo cycles of practices Tshul khrims mchog rgyal received during his career as Bonpo lama. The first column identifies the practices with conventional titles that are familiar in Bonpo circles. Hence for example, Zhi khro will refer to teachings relating to the Angry and Peaceful cohort of deities relating to the Intermediate state between rebirths. Some are title of texts and others are just names of deities (i.e. *Rtsa gsum bon skyong bzhi sbrag gi dpe rtsi* for a text on Bon protective deities; or Stag la me 'bar for a well known Bon deity which has received a number of ritual texts commentaries). The second column attempts to identify the movement the practices are ascribed to. In this case, I have chosen to associate these with the New Bon (new gter ma) when the lineage holders' list enters well-known Bonpo masters such as Kun grol drag pa or most importantly, Dran pa Nam mkha'. The Old gter ma category refers to the Old Treasure texts tradition associated with Sman ri. The last column indicates the image number (IMG) and the folio number which corresponds to a data bank of photographs of Tshul khrims mchog rgyal's original manuscript I took in 2006 at Ye shes dgon in Nyag rong. I hope to be able to produce a thorough study of this corpus in the future.

	Generic name of the cycle	Appurtenance	Reference
1	Zhi khro	New gter ma	IMG 1261 f.1
2	A khrid gzhung	Unclassifiable	IMG 1262 f.1
3	Phur nag po	Old gter ma	IMG 1264 f. 1
4	Me ri snying thig	Unclassifiable	IMG1266 f. 4
5	Rta Phyag Khyung gsum	New gter ma	IMG 1266 f. 6
6	Gtso mchog dgra brub	Unclassifiable	IMG 1269 f.1
7	Dbal gsas including A gsas (protector) and others	Unclassifiable	IMG 1268 f. 2
8	Dpal ldan Lha mo	New gter ma	IMG 1268 f. 3

9	Srid rgyal dri'u dmar	Old gter ma	IMG 1268 f.4
10	Byams ma	Old gter ma	IMG 1270 f.1
11	Mkhan chen Nyi ma bstan 'dzin corpus	Unclassifiable	IMG 1271 f.6
12	Ma mo rbod gtong snang srid zil gnon gyi rgyud	New gter ma	IMG 1272 f.1
13	Zhi khro bon spyod sku gsum rang grol	New gter ma	IMG 1272 f. 4
14	Rnam 'joms	New gter ma	IMG 1277 f. 6
15	Dbal gsas	Old gter ma	IMG 1278 f. 5
16	A (bse) rgyal (ba)	New gter ma	IMG 1278 f.6
17	Dbal gsas rngam pa	Old gter ma	IMG 1280 f.1
18	Dri med lhan skyes snyan rgyud dkar po sum	Snyan brgyud	IMG 1280 f.4
19	Drag pa yab sras kyi gzhung	New gter ma	IMG 1280 f.5
20	Dbal gsas drag po Ham chung gi rgyud	New gter ma	IMG 1282 f.2
21	Gsang drag	Old gter ma	IMG 1282 f. 3
22	Stag la me 'bar	Old gter ma	IMG 1282 f. 5
23	Bde gshegs 'dus pa	New gter ma	IMG 1284 f.2
24	Gshin rje gshed nag	New gter ma	IMG 1284 f. 4
25	Gdug dkar mo	New gter ma	IMG 1286 f.5
26	Shi khro ma gsum	New gter ma	IMG 1288 f.1
27	Gsang bsgrub rta dbu dmar chung	New gter ma	IMG 1289 f. 1

28	Tshe dpag med	New gter ma	IMG 1288 f.4
29	Rta Spyag Khyung gsum	New gter ma	IMG 1289 f.4
30	Zhi khro bde gshegs 'dus pa	New gter ma	IMG 1288 f. 5
31	Gsang gcod	New gter ma	IMG 1290 f.1
32	Dri'u dmar mo	New gter ma	IMG 1290 f. 2
33	Rgyud gsang ba gseb thub	New gter ma	IMG 1290 f.4
34	Ye shes dbal mo	New gter ma	IMG 1290 f.5
35	Gsang mchog dkyil 'kor bcu drug	New gter ma	IMG 1290 f.6
36	Rta mgrin	New gter ma	IMG 1292 f.4
37	Rtsa gsum bon skyong bzhi sbrag gi dpe rtsi	New gter ma	IMG 1292 f.5
38	Bai ro thugs thigs gong khug ma dpa' bo drag gshed lha cig ma'i gzhung	New gter ma from Kun grol grag pa's <i>Bon bskor</i>	IMG 1292 f. 6
39	Dre'u nag mo	New gter ma	IMG 1301 f.2

A first glance at this table brings to mind the overwhelming number of New Treasure texts transmissions. Although, the table only reflects a fraction of the content of this 488 folios collection, I have found it representative of the rest. There are a number of factors to keep in mind while researching this corpus. Many of the deities that belong to the Old gter ma tradition also have New gter ma texts. These are different from the more orthodox traditional writings in that, proponents of the New Treasure tradition added rites, mantras, new iconographical descriptions and also new methods of propitiation. These new texts were either received in dreams and visions or were “rediscovered” through a text, the fragment of a text, an object, or a marking and then their carried teachings were put down in writing.

There are also other writings that were added to the main ritual texts of the old Bonpo Sman ri rites. These are prayers and entreaties as well as commentaries and oral traditions put into writing. The authors are orthodox lamas from Sman ri, satellite institutions or others. Tshul khrims mchog rgyal has noted the provenance of various components of some cycles (such as Phur pa, item 3) and his writings have benefitted our understanding of the ways a given tradition was formed and its methods of transmission.

Besides Bonpo deity practices receiving a transfusion of new revelatory teachings from the proponents of New Bon, a number of Buddhist deities (such as Tshe dpag med, i.e. Amitayus, item 28) and border line characters (such as Bai ro or Vairocana fl. 8th c. item 38 who is recognized by Bonpos as one of them)<sup>21</sup> have found their ways in Bon. As mentioned before, this seems to be a characteristic of the New Bon movement, which not only reinterpret Bon but also the Buddhist traditions.

Because of many not well-known texts and deities of Bon, there were many religious lineages I was not able to clearly identify from Tshul Khrims mchog rgyal's records. Bon research is still in its infancy if we compare it to Tibetan Buddhism, as it is the hope of this researcher that further research will enable us to know more of this ancient tradition.

## Conclusion

The Bon religion is associated, in Tibetan minds, with the first forms of religious practices and beliefs in Tibet. Although historical chronicles mention Bon as being part of the apparatus of State rituals prior to and during the empire period, contemporary records and canonical texts of the Bon Canon indicates a much later time frame. Most of its scriptures appear to be 10th to late 14th century productions. Although contemporary Bonpos consider their spiritual lineages to have come down in an unbroken chain from the Imperial and Pre-Imperial times, there is little concrete evidence to support this. It does not mean that the current Bonpo canon's beliefs and practices are not much older than their written counterparts. In the past, Bonpo Canons were collections of canonical material, mostly in manuscript forms, and held by different institutions, which were spread across the Tibetan world. Their various compositions probably showed a wide range of variations (Martin et al. 2003: 12-17).

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<sup>21</sup> For a translation of his hagiography, see Palmo, Ani Jinba (trans.) *The Great Image : The life and story of Vairocana the translator*. Boston and London : Shambhala. 2004.

Due to the destruction of most of them, the present Canon and other indexes of other Bonpo canons are all we have to work with to understand the development of Bon spiritual lineages, ritual texts and practices. Our current state of knowledge of Bon does not supply us with concrete evidence to support the Bonpos' historical claims.

Many individuals and characters mentioned in spiritual lineage lists (*brgyud rim*) such as those from the records of Tshul khrims mchog rgyal have not been correctly identified and placed in spatial and chronological frameworks. This, I believe, would be an important step in reassessing our current knowledge of Bon with more accuracy. Ye shes monastery is one example among many other institutions which are important links to the social and historical understanding of Bon. The monastery's history, past and present, tell us about the dynamics of cultural adaptation, religious syncretism and the functions this institution plays in Tibetan society, locally and at large. The story we can gather from this brief preliminary report is that Bon has never been a monolithic tradition and that although there were important institutions which worked to consolidate and articulate an orthodox point of view of the tradition as a whole, in reality, many tendencies and currents challenged this and continue to change Bon according to the tides of trends and ideas of modern society and culture.

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# Revisiting the Problem of Bon Identity: Bon Priests and Ritual Practitioners in the Himalayas

Geoffrey Samuel

## Introduction

The Bon religion of Tibet and its followers, the Bon po, first became known to Western scholars through the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism. In Buddhist historical writings, Bon is presented as the religion of Tibet in pre-Buddhist times, and specifically as the religion supported by the anti-Buddhist party at the Tibetan imperial court from the seventh to ninth centuries. As this suggests, Bon is portrayed by these texts in negative terms, as a rival religious tradition opposed to the civilising mission of Buddhism in Tibet.

That mission was not seen by Tibetan Buddhists as a merely human enterprise, but as an undertaking that was throughout guided and promoted by the Buddhist deities themselves, above all by the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteśvara (Tibetan: *Spyan ras gzigs*). Avalokiteśvara is held to have taken rebirth numerous times in the course of Tibetan history, most notably as the successive Dalai Lamas, in order to bring it about. A critical Tibetan term here is *'dul ba*, which has a range of meanings including taming, disciplining, and bringing under cultivation. It is among other things the Tibetan term used to translate Vinaya, the Buddhist disciplinary code. I have written elsewhere of the opposition between tame and wild, between disciplined and uncontrolled, in Tibetan societies, and the place of the Buddhist lamas as those whose function is to undertake the taming (Samuel 1993a: 217-222).

Part of this Buddhist mission of taming Tibet was the conversion of the local gods and spirits of Tibet into protectors of the Buddhist dharma, which was carried out, in Buddhist legend, by the great Indian Tantric master Padmasambhava, usually known in Tibetan as Guru Padma 'byung gnas, the 'Lotus-Born Guru,' or Guru Rin po che, the 'Precious Guru'. Padmasambhava is closely linked to Avalokiteśvara, and became a major ritual figure in his own right within Tibetan Buddhism, especially among the Rnying ma pa, the 'Old Order' of Tibetan Buddhism which claims to go back to the

teachings of Padmasambhava during his visit to Tibet. Padmasambhava was summoned or invited to Tibet by the then Tibetan emperor, Khri strong lde'u btsan, because the deities of Tibet opposed the building of the first Tibetan monastery at bSam yas in Central Tibet. 'What the king's men built by daylight, the spirits destroyed and levelled each night. Thus, the construction could not progress.' (Nyang Ral 1993: 58). As Padmasambhava travelled from his meditation-cave in Nepal through Tibet to Bsam yas, he subjugated the local deities through his Tantric power and forced them to take oaths of obedience to the Dharma (cf. Blondeau 1971; Samuel 1993a: 168-70). This is a critical and central episode for the entire conceptual structure of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, since the ability of later generations to control the deities through Tantric Buddhist ritual and so to secure the prosperity and wellbeing of the Tibetan people is premised on this initial submission of the deities to Padmasambhava.

The Tantric Buddhist deities and their earthly representatives were thus engaged in a process of taming, ordering, and bringing under cultivation of the wild territory of Tibet and its various human and non-human inhabitants. This process was never fully achieved, even before the Chinese takeover overturned much of what had been accomplished over many centuries. Tibetan Buddhist lamas today may still see themselves in some sense as engaged in this ongoing work, which has indeed been extended to the many other parts of the world in which lamas now live and teach.

The resistance of the deities to Buddhist control is linked thematically to the resistance of the pro-Bon party at court during the reigns of the final two Tibetan emperors. The first of these emperors, in the semi-historical accounts of later Tibetan historians, was pro-Buddhist, but the second, Glang dar ma, is described as supporting Bon and persecuting the Buddhists. He was eventually killed by a Buddhist monk, an event that precipitated the end of the united Tibetan empire.

So much for Bon in the Tibetan Buddhist historical accounts. Buddhist religious texts are not much more informative, since Tibetan Buddhist religious authors are generally not much concerned even with other Buddhist traditions within Tibet, except for polemical purposes. One exception was in fact translated into English in the early 20th century. This is the description of Bon teachings by the great late 18th-century Tibetan scholar Thu'u bkwan Chos kyi nyi ma in his great comparative survey, the *Grub mtha' shel gyi me long*. However, it had little if any impact on Western understandings of Bon (cf. Samuel 1993b). The one significant Western translation of a Bon po text before the 1960s, Francke's version of the *Gzer myig*, a hagiography of the central figure of the

Bon religion, Ston pa Gshen rab, also seems to have made little impression (Francke 1924-49).

Tibetan Buddhists themselves, whether lamas, monks, or laity, frequently retain strong prejudice against Bon po even in modern times (see e.g. Namkhai Norbu 1981: 22, which notes the irrationality of such prejudice). The Bon po were seen as the untamed, as practitioners of sorcery and evil magic, as a kind of negative reversal of Buddhism's civilizing mission, and Buddhists were brought up to distrust and fear them. Bon po were also often accused of practising animal sacrifice, which has long been a particularly significant issue for Tibetan Buddhists (cf. Samuel 2005: 192-214), although in point of fact it would appear that contemporary Bon po are no more likely to sacrifice animals than contemporary Tibetan Buddhists. The issue of animal sacrifice however has led to a distinction from the Tibetan Buddhist perspective between so-called 'black Bon' (*bon nag*), which includes such practices, and 'white Bon' (*bon dkar*) which is said to have rejected them under Buddhist reform.

The Bon po themselves, although occasionally mentioned in the travel literature, seem never to have been asked what they thought about their own religion. The major Bon po areas of Tibet were some way from the standard itineraries of European travellers, which focussed on the trade route from India to Shigatse, Gyantse and Lhasa. On the rare occasions when Bon po monasteries were encountered, they seem to have been viewed almost entirely through Buddhist stereotypes, as in the account given by the German Buddhist Anagarika Govinda of a visit to a Bon po monastery in his autobiographical memoir, *Way of the White Clouds* (Govinda 1974).<sup>1</sup> By the mid-20th century, Bon had become a kind of area of free fantasy for scholars writing about Tibetan religion. Virtually nothing was known about Bon except for a bundle of negative stereotypes, so scholars felt free to project almost anything on to it: Bon was animistic, shamanistic (not a positive term in those days), and generally a repository for all the elements of Tibetan religion which did not appear to derive from the somewhat idealised pictures of Indian Buddhism prevailing at that time.

Studies of the Bon religion of Tibet underwent a dramatic change in the 1960s and 1970s, when the voices of the Bon po themselves began to be taken seriously. The writings of David Snellgrove (e.g. 1961, 1967), Per Kvaerne (e.g. 1974) and Samten Karmay (e.g. 1972, 1975) opened up to us a very different Bon, a religious tradition which was comparable to, and indeed in many ways very similar to, Tibetan Buddhism,

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<sup>1</sup> This was the monastery of Guru Gyam near Mount Kailash; Govinda visited the area in September 1948 (Kvaerne 1998: 81-83).

with its own monasteries, lamas and texts, its own sense of its history and lineage, and its own project of taming and civilizing the Tibetan people. 'White Bon,' 'Black Bon,' animal sacrifices, sorcery and shamanistic rituals were nowhere to be seen, though certainly, as with Tibetan Buddhism, itself there were plenty of rituals with this-worldly and pragmatic purposes.

A younger generation of Bon scholars, Western and Tibetan, has extended this picture, and through their work we have begun to appreciate the complex processes through which this scholarly Bon po religious tradition, which I shall call G.yung drung Bon here for convenience, since that is one of the tradition's principal names for itself, came into being and differentiated itself from the early Rnying ma pa tradition during the 10th and 11th centuries. All this has been a valuable and indeed fundamental contribution towards the contemporary understanding of Tibetan religion, and an essential move away from earlier pictures of Bon as some kind of primitive pre-Buddhist cult. Instead today we have Bon recognised as a parallel tradition to Buddhism. That recognition was dramatically symbolised by the 14th Dalai Lama's public participation in Bon po ceremonies wearing Bon po robes, in effect accepting that Bon was a valid Tibetan tradition of spiritual cultivation in its own right.

These are undoubtedly positive developments. There is no doubt that the present view of Bon is a great advance, both in scholarly and in human terms, on the stereotypes prevailing before the work of Karmay, Snellgrove and Kvaerne. However, the picture is not quite that simple, since it is becoming clear from contemporary ethnographic accounts that this view of Bon as a Tibetan religious tradition parallel to and closely allied to Buddhism is not the only kind of Bon still practised in Tibetan cultural regions.

More specifically, there remains a range of local, village-based religious practices among contemporary culturally Tibetan populations which are referred to as Bon but which have no obvious connection with the sophisticated scholarly tradition of G.yung drung Bon lamas, monks and lay practitioners. At the same time, these kinds of Bon recall some of the older stereotypes of Bon practice, of black and white Bon, of ongoing rivalries between Buddhism and Bon, and the like. These kinds of village Bon practice have received little systematic scholarly attention, but a variety of studies in the Himalayan borderlands, ranging from Central Nepal through Sikkim to Bhutan, and on into Arunachal Pradesh and Southern Kham, have described practices that have at any rate a clear family resemblance to each other. This leaves us with a number of questions, which provoked the present paper: What are these practices, and do they

belong together in some sense? Why are they called Bon, and what relationship if any do they have to the sophisticated scholarly tradition of G.yung drung Bon? What kind of historical sense might we make of this situation?

I should add that I do not assume that the fact that two or more things are called Bon necessarily means that there is a close historical or other connection between them. There may be, but equally the label Bon may have become attached to several quite different things. To begin with, it is useful to look more closely at some of the studies to which I have referred.

### **The (Lha) Bon Complex: Village Bon in the Tibetan Borderlands**

The Nepalese studies were written by a number of well-known Western anthropologists of Tibet and Nepal from the early 1990s onwards, including Hildegard Diemberger working with the Khumbo in Eastern Tibet and Charles Ramble in the Kali Gandaki Valley. It is worth looking at these studies also in relation to work on the Tamang people in various locations in Nepal by David Holmberg, Brigitte Steinmann, and others. Anna Balikci's work on Sikkim, originally written as a PhD at SOAS, like these studies forms part of a long-standing Western research tradition in the Himalayas.

I will also consider a number of recent Bhutanese studies. The Bhutanese research is less well known and has been written by a group of native Bhutanese scholars, several of whom had studied anthropology outside Bhutan. It includes a number of papers given at IATS and other international conferences, as well as a small book published by the Centre for Bhutan Studies in 2004, called *Wayo, Wayo – Voices from the Past*. This book contains seven studies by native Bhutanese scholars of village festivals, all of them involving priests or ritual officiants referred to as *bon*, or practices described by the participants as Bon practices (cf. Choden 2004, Dorji 2004, etc).

### **Khumbo**

We can start with the term *lha bon* –locally pronounced *lhaven* – first I think introduced to Western scholarship in a 1992 paper by Hildegard Diemberger, referring to the community of Khumbo in Eastern Nepal (Diemberger 1992). Khumbo is, in Diemberger's

words, “the self-designation of an originally rather heterogeneous people made up of different clans who came [. . .] from Tibet at different times and from various directions. Nowadays, they are farmers and animal keepers inhabiting the steep slopes of the Arun Valley and the high pastures at the foot of Mount Makalu in Nepal” (1993: 90). So this is a fairly remote Tibetan population in an area that, we learn, still had little centralised control, at any rate at the time Hildegard first got to know them in the 1980s:

There has never been any structure of institutionalized central power: the exercise of informal power is based on the concept of uphang [dbu-phang] [. . .] which may be glossed as ‘prestige’. Uphang and wangthang [Dbang-thang] (literally, ‘power’), ideally bestowed by clan and mountain deities, define the status of the ‘great people’ (Mi che che [Mi che che]) who determine internal politics. These are mainly religious specialists: the Buddhist lama [Bla-ma], the lhaven [lha-bon] whose religion is centred upon the local clan and mountain deities and the lhakama [lha-bka’-ma], the female oracle [. . .]. Yet there is no social stratification: social hierarchy is quite flexible and ‘great people’ are also peasants like everybody else. (1993: 90).

So the *lhaven* here is a priest of the local clan and mountain deities, and, as we will see, he has a cooperative relationship with the lama. The Khumbo strike me as very much the kind of Tibetan population that would fit well into the “Zomia” model advanced by James Scott in his *The Art of Not Being Governed* (cf. Samuel 2010). They are people who are living in an area with little centralised power, and who in fact may well have settled in this area in order to escape the ravages of political power elsewhere in the Tibetan cultural region. I do not want to make too much of Scott’s specific model here, but I think that the relatively remote location of this population is worth noting, since it is also characteristic of most of the other examples.

The *lhaven*’s role is based on his knowledge of the invocations to the spirits and deities of the local environment. These invocations name more than a hundred local spirits in relation to various places in the Khumbo territory, so that the *lhaven*’s invocation “draws an idealised map of the entire region of settlement” (Diemberger 2002: 108 – my translation). On Khumbo altars, the lama’s tormas, which derive from the Rnying ma byang gter tradition, are on the right hand side; the *lhaven*’s tormas, representing local clan and mountain deities, are on the left (2002: 110-111). So here we

have complementarity and cooperation between the *lha bon* and lama, who in fact are using the left and right sides of the same altar.

## Te

Moving on from the Khumbo, I consider another community in Nepal, that described in Charles Ramble's recent ethnography *The Navel of the Demoness* (Ramble 2008). Ramble's book is a detailed ethnography of Te, one of a group of five villages in southern Mustang who speak a distinctive Tibeto-Burman language known as Seke. One would, I suppose, describe these villages as culturally Tibetan in a generic sense – the villagers are mostly also fluent in the local Tibetan dialect. Many features of local society are characteristic of other Tibetan communities, particularly those in relatively peripheral regions such as this. While the people of Te appear to do their best to keep external political authority at arms' length, they live in a single densely-populated settlement, which has quite a complex internal political organisation, and in this respect contrast with the Khumbo.

The people of Te have hereditary Buddhist lamas of the Rnying ma tradition<sup>2</sup> and they also have a special hereditary priest known as the *lhawen* (again spelled *lha bon*). The people of Te are unusual, though by no means unique, among Tibetan communities in Nepal in that they still carry out animal sacrifices to the local deities or *yul lha*. These involve the sacrifice of a total of six animals per year, five goats and a sheep, on the occasion of two calendrical festivals. The Te *lhawen*'s role is linked to these animal sacrifices, and it is fairly basic – he recites a brief invocation before the animals are sacrificed by his two assistants, who are two of a variety of village officials selected from different village households on an annual basis.<sup>3</sup> So *bon* here again basically appears to mean someone who invokes and makes offerings to the local deities.

In other villages in the region, similar priests are known by other names, including *aya* and *drom* (cf. e.g. Ramble 2007), but in the present context I am concerned with the use of the term *lha bon* for priests of this kind. I also note in passing that while there are spirit-mediums in the area, in other words people who are possessed by local deities and through whom those deities speak, and Te has had one of these in the

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<sup>2</sup> There used to be a Sa skya monastic presence, but it has more or less disappeared.

<sup>3</sup> They are “the youngest of the four constables and the youngest member of the *yupa*, the assembly of estates” (Ramble 2008: 198-9). On *lha bon* see also Ramble (1998).



recent past, these spirit-mediums, as among the Khumbo, are quite distinct from the *lhawen* and are not referred to by the same term.

The question of the relationship between Buddhism and the cult of the mountain gods is a major topic of Ramble's work. He argues that the real focus of Te's religious life is neither Buddhism nor the cult of the local deities, but what he calls the civic religion of the village – in the sense of Robert Bellah's well-known article, 'Civil Religion in America' (Bellah 1967). Much village ritual is quite explicitly about the political organisation of the village. Both the Buddhist elements and the cult of the local deities have essentially been incorporated into this 'civic religion' as ways of achieving the collective desires of the villagers for the preservation and continuity of the community.

Te is a somewhat unusual village in its very strong focus on village political life, and its separateness from the surrounding communities – In the past, Te was almost completely endogamous. The question remains of how far we might choose to regard Te as an anomaly, and how far as an alternative prism through which to look at Tibetan village society more generally, particularly in these relatively peripheral areas where historically there was little centralised political authority, and villagers ran their own affairs most of the time. At any rate, Te represents a situation where the community is apparently keeping the institutions of Tibetan Buddhism somewhat at arm's length.

The cult of local deities of various kinds is or was of course standard throughout most cultural Tibetan Buddhist communities, if carried out with considerable local variation. Generally speaking lay people make regular smoke offerings (*bsangs mchod*) of juniper, other scented woods and 'pure' substances, to these deities, both at home on behalf of the household, and collectively on behalf of the community. Local deities also receive offerings in Buddhist ritual. In the Buddhist ritual context, as mentioned earlier, these deities are thought of as having been subdued and tamed by Guru Rinpoche in ancient times, so that they are obliged to respond to the demands made of them by present-day lamas and Buddhist ritual practitioners. One significant feature of the Te situation though, which again will recur in some of our other accounts, is that the local deities are regarded as being 'wild'. In an explicit reference to the conversion myth I mentioned earlier, the people of Te claim that their local deities were never effectively tamed by Guru Rinpoche (Ramble 2008: 190).

## Tamang

Another group of studies from Nepal is worth mentioning in this connection. These are on the Tamang, an ethnonym that covers a somewhat varied population of mid-highlands peoples, all speaking a language closely related to Tibetan and with many Tibetan cultural features (Macdonald 1989). The Tamang have ritual specialists called Bombo – in other words *Bon po* – whom David Holmberg and other specialists on Tamang society describe as shamans, and who heal illness through visionary journeys in which they seek to discover the spirits who are causing the illness and recover the lost spirit-substance, shadow-soul or life-essence of the sick person.<sup>4</sup> The Tamang also have lamas, and, according to Holmberg, in the older material there is a kind of ritualised conflict between *bombo* and *lama*, with a number of variants of a myth told by both *bombo* and *lama* of rivalry between the two, ending in an agreement that the *bombo* will look after the living, and the *lama* will take care of the funerary rites. This is a story known in Tibetan literature through its appearance in relation to Milarepa's contest with a *Bon po* practitioner.<sup>5</sup>

However what is worth noting is that there is a third significant class of ritual specialists in Tamang communities, the *lambu* – a term which can plausibly related, again, to *lha bon*.<sup>6</sup> The *lambu* is a sacrificial priest and is responsible for offerings to the deities. Unlike the *bombo*, whose visionary journeys have an exploratory nature, the *lambu*, like the Khumbo and Te *lha-bon*, has a fixed repertoire of chants referring to the various local deities (Holmberg 1984, 1989).

Lamas and sacrificers [*lambu*] can in fact replace each other for many rituals and, for the purposes of this brief article, we can understand them in opposition to shamans or bombos who practice from what appears – through the vantage of the rituals of lama and lambu – a deconstructive shift. (Holmberg 2006: 90)

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<sup>4</sup> The term for this life-essence is *bla*, obviously cognate to Tibetan *bla*, which also refers to a life-essence that can be lost and recovered (Samuel 1993a: 186-7, 263-4), though the historical relationship between the two concepts is unclear.

<sup>5</sup> In the Tibetan version, as in the Tamang Buddhist version, the Buddhist figure naturally comes out on top, but the Tamang bombo account has the bombo as the winner.

<sup>6</sup> Rajendra Thokar uses the spelling *lhabon* in his article (2008: 398).

The Tamang again figure themselves as ‘on the wild side’ in relation to Tibetan Buddhism - the Tamang goddess was never bound by Buddhist lamas (Holmberg 2006: 98), and the rituals of the Tamang lamas seem pretty rough and ready by comparison with their Tibetan equivalents.

## Sikkim

The Sikkimese material is fairly similar to what we have already seen for Khumbo and Te. The Sikkimese population is a mixture of Lepchas, Tibetans, and recent Nepalese immigrants, but Tingchim, the village north of Gangtok where Anna Balikci undertook her research, is a Tibetan village. It is some way from the nearest substantial monastery, and Balikci notes that although “villagers considered themselves Buddhists, there were no lamas in Tingchim until 1910 and people were dependent on shamans and other ritual specialists” (Balikci 2002: 18). More specifically, there were male and female shamans, there was a specialist in Tantric ritual, the *nagshong*, and there was a specialist known as the *bönben bongthing*<sup>7</sup> who performed the offering rituals for the supernatural beings of the locality.<sup>8</sup> To quote Balikci further,

Tingchim villagers collectively refer to the ritual knowledge of the *pawo*, *nejum*, *nagshong* and *bönben bongthing* as *bön* (*bon*), or more precisely as *lhabön* (*lha bon*) if it is concerned with the protective *pholha molha*, and as *drebön* (*'dre bon*) if it is concerned with honouring or appeasing the ambivalent local supernatural beings. What they call *bön* has probably little relation with the Bön religion of pre-Buddhist Tibet and certainly no relation with the tradition of the modern Tibetan Bonpo monasteries. (Balikci 2002: 19)

Elsewhere she notes that *bön* in Tingchim “refers to specific oral ritual texts that are chanted and considered to be the core of the *bön* specialists’ ritual knowledge” (2002: 338). Balikci gives some details of two principal texts, both of which were centred around narrations of a figure called Yum Machen Düsum Sangye (‘Great Mother, Buddha of the Three Times’), who is represented as a daughter of Gshen rab, the

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<sup>7</sup> *Bönben* (*bon ban*) means “Bonpo monk (*bandhe*)”. *Bongthing* is a term for similar practitioners among the Tibetan’s Lepcha neighbours.

<sup>8</sup> The shamans were more concerned with the village ancestral deities, the *pholha molha*.

founder of Bon in the Tibetan G.yung drung tradition (2002: 279, 289-90, 338). As Mother, Yum Machen Düsum Sangye forms a couple with the Father, Guru Rinpoche (in other words Padmasambhava; 2002: 346).

As we can see, there are some rather complex transformations going on here in relation to the official textual narratives of both Tibetan Buddhism and G.yung drung Bon. I would suggest that rather than seeing the village mythology as a reduced and confused derivative of some earlier textual narrative, we might see the folk and textual accounts as parallel, and probably as both going back in some form for many centuries.<sup>9</sup>

It is also worth noting that while there is a shamanic component to *bön* in some of the Nepalese and Sikkimese material, the key role, the one most specifically labelled as *bönben*, *lhaven*, *lambu* etc, is not about possession, but about the making of invocations and offerings to local gods. These invocations and the ritual procedures that go with them, including the offering of *torma*, the sacrificial offering-cakes of butter and barley-flour widely used also in the ritual of the lamas, are the key ritual knowledge for these specialists.

## Bhutan

The material from Bhutan, if less detailed, is similar, and quite extensive. The *Wayo*, *Wayo* collection, published in 2004 by the Centre for Bhutan studies, consists of seven papers, all by Bhutanese scholars, and all mentioning local practices and/or ritual specialists termed *bon* or *bonpo* which fit into the same general frame as those discussed already.<sup>10</sup> Thus the opening chapter, by Tashi Choeden, describes a village festival (*Ha*) performed annually in the village of Gurtshom, on the Kuri Chu river, and other nearby villages ‘in order to propitiate local gods and deities’ (Choden 2004). This is regarded by local villagers as a *bon kar* or ‘white *bön*’ practice – the black/white opposition refers to the previously-discussed idea of *bön* having been reformed and cleaned up under Buddhist influence: Choeden says that black *bön* would involve ‘activities such as black magic sorceries and animal sacrifices’ (2004: fn, p.1), much in agreement with the standard line retailed by early Western studies of Tibetan religion. The last *bon* ritual

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<sup>9</sup> Compare McKim Marriott’s well-known article on relations between village and literary versions of Hindu ritual and mythology (Marriott 1955). While one might be wary of speaking of ‘Great’ and ‘Little’ Traditions in the Tibetan context, a mutual relationship between vernacular/oral and monastic/literary versions seems as evident here as in the Indian material.

<sup>10</sup> Several of these scholars, and other Bhutanese scholars, have written elsewhere on related material, somewhat extending the picture, e.g. Pelgyen 2002; Pelgen 2002, 2007; Penjore 2009; T. Dorji 2002.

specialist however died some forty years ago, and the practice is now led by *gomchen* or lay Buddhist practitioners. It involves the offering of *torma* to local deities.

The following chapter, by Lham Dorji, describes a group of village rituals known as *roop* and performed in the middle Kheng region of Bhutan. “The rituals involve *kartshog* or white offerings consisting of feast, libation and fumigation offerings to local protecting deities, gods and goddesses of seed and legendary founders of Bon” (L. Dorji 2004: 24). This is again regarded as a ‘white *bon*’ practice. The village Bon po makes offerings to the founder of Bon (Toenpa Shenrab) and the goddess Amai Gung Lhai Gyalmo, and to the god and goddesses of seeds (Sonmo Apa Gojayla and Sonmo Ama Deleg Dolma). All of these rituals have a strong element of fertility and prosperity, and in the Bhutanese versions often include explicitly sexual imagery, verses, and games. The role of Bon po is not hereditary and anyone who knows the invocations can perform the role. There is a strong emphasis on the need for communal harmony during the festival, and the Bon po has responsibility for ensuring this, and can fine villagers who squabble or fight.

The third paper, by Dorji Penjore, gives a generally similar account of a village festival in the outer Kheng region that involves the worship of another Bon deity, Bon lha O de Gongjan (Penjore 2004). The name of this deity is similar to that of ‘O lde gung rgyal, an important deity who figures in the origin myths of the Tibetan emperors, though Penjore is unsure as to whether there is a relationship. Again we have a black bon/white bon contrast; the village festival is regarded as white bon, the absence of animal sacrifices being a key marker, and again there is a non-hereditary village practitioner called the Bon po, but with little evident relationship to the G.yung drung monastic Bon of Tibet. Phuntsho Rapten’s account of a Lower Kheng village offering is similar (Rapten 2004). In this case, as in the Sikkimese example, we have a village shaman participating along with the Bon po, along with a ritual clown, the Gadpupa, reminiscent of the Atsara who play such a significant role in the Bhutanese Buddhist ritual dance tradition (cf. Pommaret 2006). The three remaining papers offer further variations on similar themes (Galay 2004; Kinga 2004; Pelgen 2004).

There is a lot of detailed material in the *Wayo, Wayo* collection, including a number of ritual invocations used in the festivals, and one could say more about these, particularly the ‘ritual journey’ theme which links back to work on the Tamang and elsewhere, but I shall stop here. Before moving on to a final section in which I try to make some sense of all this material, I note however that the Toni Huber has carried out research, as yet unpublished, on similar practitioners in eastern Bhutan and over

the border in the culturally-Tibetan region of Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh,<sup>11</sup> and that Giovanni Da Col has reported something that sounds quite similar from the Tibetan region of Dechen in Yunnan.<sup>12</sup>

## Analysis

So what does Bon refer to? One can provide a listing somewhat as follows:

1. *Bon* and *gshen* known from Dunhuang documents
2. The organized religion of Bon (*G.yung drung bon*) – with hereditary lineages, reincarnate lamas, monasteries etc and the associated use of *bon* as equivalent to *chos* and to Skt. *dharma*
3. *bon*, *lhabon* as invoker-priests of various kinds in Himalayas
4. *bombo* shamans (Tamang) – with myths of competition with Milarepa and other Tibetan lamas
5. Buddhist negative stereotypes of *bon*

The role of *bon* and *gshen* in non-Buddhist religious documents from Dunhuang (no.1) has been studied at some length (cf. Dotson 2008); the use of *bon* in such texts seems to have little relationship to the other senses of Bon listed above. The G.yung drung Bon tradition (no.2), to which those Tibetans who identify as *Bon po* today owe their allegiance, is also distinct and by now fairly well understood. As a result of recent historical work by scholars such as Henk Blezer and Dan Martin, and parallel work on early Rnying ma by David Germano and others, we now have a fair idea of the 11th and 12th century context in which both the G.yung drung Bon and Rnying ma traditions came into existence, out of a need among practitioners of the fragmentary ritual lineages that survived from the early Empire or developed in the immediately following period to create coherent traditions of religious practice competitive with the newly-

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<sup>11</sup> Personal communication, May 2011 and December 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Da Col reports that “every village has a ritual expert named *yanglen penghen*” – i.e. *g.yang len bon rgan*, ‘elder Bon fortune summoner’. *Yang* here refers not only to wealth and prosperity but “good luck, vitality and all positive aspects of one’s life” (Da Col 2007).

imported Indian lineages of the “New Tantra” (gsar ma pa) followers (e.g. Martin 2001; Blezer 2009-10, 2010; Germano 1994, 2002, 2005).

The Tamang *bombo* (no.4) seems to be something of an outlier, and the negative stereotypes of Bon (no.5) also need not detain us here, although they continue to be a real issue for some Bon po populations today, both in those parts of Tibet under Chinese control and among the diaspora in India and Nepal. But what of the kind of Bon which has formed the main subject of this article (no. 3), and which appears to exist in various forms in Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, and perhaps also Yunnan? One option is to take it at face value, and to argue that the areas where it occurs have not been fully ‘tamed’ or ‘Tibetanised,’ and that Bon is a generic label for these survivals from an earlier period of Tibetan religion. In this case, perhaps, such forms of Bon may have been much more widely distributed in pre-modern times.

Another option is to take the use of Bon in these contexts primarily as a result of relatively recent campaigns by Buddhist lamas, in which Bon has been utilised as a negative label applied for practices to be replaced by more orthodox Buddhist versions.<sup>13</sup> This view would not entirely conflict with the first option, but might suggest that rather than looking for a consistent body of material over a large region, what we are encountering is more of the nature of a series of local religious complexes that have acquired a somewhat misleading common label, perhaps in recent times.

One can also read the material in a third way, suggested in part by Ramble’s account, also by Scott’s work on SE Asian Highlands (‘Zomia’). In this reading, these are areas that have made a certain choice not to be fully ‘tamed’. We note in particular the references to the incomplete nature of Guru Rinpoche’s work. This is quite different from what might be expected from ‘mainstream’ G.yung drung Bon. There the emphasis would be on the taming having been carried out by a Bon figure such as Dren pa Nam mkha’ rather than Guru Rinpoche. The village Bon practices do not however indicate a preference for an alternative process of ‘taming’ but, rather, signal that these communities choose to remain in significant part untamed.

Thus, in the cases we are looking at here, one might see ‘Bon’ less as an indication of primordality than as an assertion of distance from mainstream religion, whether Buddhist or Bon. The village festivals, with their conspicuously open sexuality or ‘obscenity’ (e.g. Chhoki 1994, Pelgen 2002) could be seen as acting this out quite

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<sup>13</sup> Toni Huber has suggested this may be part of the explanation for Tawang and Eastern Bhutan (personal communication, May 2011).

dramatically. Also, note the way in which the Khumbo *lhawen* appears to adopt the Buddhist ritual technology of *tormas*. Possibly the *torma* was a pre-Buddhist item in Tibet, but when the Buddhist lama's *torma* is on one side of the altar and the *lhawen*'s on the other side, there is an implied relationship between the two which is complementary, rather than simply historical and sequential. The collaboration between *lhawen* and *lama* may be friendly, but it also undercuts the pre-eminence of the lama that is so marked a feature of most 'mainstream' Tibetan religion, Buddhist or Bon.

Animal sacrifice is a critical issue (see Samuel 1994).<sup>14</sup> If a community wanted to assert that it was not quite under the authority of the lamas (Buddhist or Bon po), then animal sacrifice was a good way to do it, at least until the 1950s. At that time, however, the authority of the lamas gave way rapidly to that of centralised state regimes, not only in China, but also, if under less destructive and tragic circumstances, in Bhutan, Sikkim and the culturally Tibetan regions of Nepal. Animal sacrifice, and for that matter the whole complex of *lha bon*-type observances, became increasingly irrelevant, and there was a rapid movement towards more normative forms of practice, which was encouraged in the Himalayan context by the presence refugee lamas from Tibet.

The Tamang still had frequent animal sacrifices in the 1980s (Holmberg 1989: 121), though they have come under pressure to abandon them in recent years. Te still held out at the time of Ramble's study, but things were clearly changing quite fast. The Kheng groups in Bhutan have mostly stopped animal sacrifices, in some cases quite recently, and hereditary Bon po, if and where they existed, are mostly a thing of the past. The overall social and religious environment is now of course quite different, and the issues are now more to do with modernity and development, not with the authority of the Buddhist lamas. Thus the Kheng districts are generally regarded in contemporary Bhutan as backward, underdeveloped, and poor. To the extent that village festivals and offerings to local deities have meanings within the contemporary State regimes, they figure as folkloristic survivals, which is essentially the frame of the current round of Bhutanese studies, and perhaps also as possible generators of tourist revenue.

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<sup>14</sup> More precisely, since no Tibetan lay populations have rejected the eating of meat altogether, this is a question of how far the killing of animals is ritualised. The abolition of animal sacrifice has not, at least not until very recently, had much effect on the killing and eating of animals. While the idea of freeing animals in order to generate positive karma and prolong one's own life goes back a very long way, the emphasis among a number of present-day lamas on vegetarianism and animal rights is a recent development in the Tibetan context.



But can we reach any overall conclusion about the meaning of Bon? Perhaps what the material in this article really does is simply to make again the point that there is no single thing called Bon. This is a term that has been used by Tibetans and culturally Tibetan groups in a variety of ways. We need to study these independently, with careful attention to how they have been used in the past, and how they are being used today. To the extent that this story has a wider moral, it can perhaps serve as another demonstration of the ways in which Western categories of 'religion,' ultimately of Protestant Christian provenance, continue to confuse our understandings of non-Western societies. If Western scholars from the beginning had been less caught up in the idea of a 'Bon religion' separate from 'Buddhism,' and more able to figure both *chos* ('Buddhism') and *bon* as complex, situationally-variable signifiers used in a variety of historically-specific contexts, we might have found the whole question of what Bon means less paradoxical and contradictory.

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**REVISITING THE PROBLEM OF BON IDENTITY: BON PRIESTS 97  
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# Where to Look For the Origins of Zhang zhung-related Scripts?<sup>1</sup>

Henk Blezer, Kalsang Norbu Gurung, and Saraju Rath

## Summary: Zhang zhung-related Scripts



‘Zhang zhung’ Royal Seal of Lig myi rhya Bon sgo, Vol.8 (1995), p.55 (discussed below)

As stories go, in the good old days of Bon, larger or smaller parts of what we now call Tibet outshone the Yar lung dynasty. In the ancient, Western Tibetan kingdom of Zhang zhung, long-lived masters and scholars transmitted Bon lore in their own Zhang zhung languages. These were not only colloquial, but also literary languages, written in their native Zang zhung scripts, such as Smar chung and Smar

chen. Documents supposedly were also extant in other varieties of scripts, called Spungs so chung ba and Spungs so che ba, which are said to derive—it is not clear how

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper we present some preliminary results and hypotheses based on a pilot study on Zhang zhung-related Scripts. This pilot study was a sub-project of *Three Pillars of Bon: Doctrine, ‘Location’ (of Origin) & Founder—Historiographical Strategies and their Contexts in Bon Religious Historical Literature*, NWO Vidi, grant number 276-50-002, which ran from 2005 to 2010 at CNWS/LIAS, Leiden University. In this research programme, our main goal was to understand the process of formation of Bon religious identity in Tibet at the turn of the first millennium C.E. We analysed emic Bon (and Buddhist) views of history and developed new historiographical methodologies.

exactly—from a region called Ta zig, an area which generally is located somewhere in the far west, beyond the borders even of Western Tibet.<sup>2</sup>

Where did these scripts come from and when did they first evolve? Can we tell at all, or is this one of those many bonpo enigmas that we simply cannot yet solve with sufficient certainty, another incentive, no doubt, to devote more research to those fascinating Bon religious historical narratives? This article is mainly devoted to a preliminary examination of extant samples of the scripts. Most of these are surprisingly recent. Space does not allow us to present and discuss the various, interesting, traditional narratives on the matter (except when they are directly relevant to issues of dating)—these will have to await a separate publication.

## Part I - Introduction

### The Three Pillars of Bon

Bon historiography reveals a peculiar configuration. Especially when it comes to antecedents of Bon, we typically find relatively late narratives on ‘incredibly’ early origins, such as the purported birth of the founder of Bon, Ston pa Gshen rab, in the Indian Palaeolithic: 16,017 B.C.E—according to the 19th century bonpo scholar Mkhan chen Nyi ma bstan dzin. Other early referents in time and space, similarly, often are difficult to ascertain and remain elusive. For methodological reasons, we therefore have had to refocus, systematically, from the elusive content of historical narratives and their meaning to a more modest objective: sketching a history of the narratives themselves.

Religious historical narratives typically prioritise the expression of particular structures and potentials for meaning over historical and geographical fact. We therefore propose to disregard, for the time being, the narrated content of the story and its concrete references in time and space. Instead, we simply ask when a story is first told, how it develops over time, and under which circumstances. This exegetically

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<sup>2</sup> For some of the narratives see, e.g., work by Lopon Tenzin Namdak, such as his *Snga rabs bod kyi byung ba brjod pa'i 'bel gtam lung gi sning po* (Namdak 1983) or, for a brief account in English, see Nyima Dakpa 2005.



frugal approach yields quite surprising insights into the historiography of major Bon narratives and doctrines, and into what, for our program, we call the ‘three pillars of bon’ identity. Systematic application of this methodology often puts religious historical sensibilities, both Buddhist and Bon, upside down. Historicising historical narratives we typically look *at* the ‘mirror’ of history, rather than *in* it (see Blezer 2013c).

### **Tropes of Far Western Origins: 'Ol mo lung ring, 'Ta zig', and Zhang zhung**

One of these ‘pillars’ concerns stories about far western origins of Bon from regions in Western Tibet and beyond. Bonpos usually locate their origins in far western Tibetan regions called ‘Zhang zhung’, and ultimately project their origins, even further west beyond those regions, into historically and geographically nebulous entities, such as ‘Ta zig’<sup>3</sup> and the geographically even more obscure ‘location’ 'Ol mo lung ring. Cartographers are not the only ones who have trouble putting 'Ol mo lung ring on the map. Some bonpos regard 'Ol mo lung ring as beyond this world, not unlike Shambhala for some Buddhists. It is difficult to sift historically reliable data from the traditional narratives, particularly on the latter two.

According to Buddhist, Bon and also Chinese sources, Zhang zhung was a powerful kingdom in larger western Tibet, which in some more recent traditional accounts as well as according to some academic (often linguistic-based) speculations even is believed to include parts of India and Nepal. Zhang zhung presumably had a king or lineages of kings; Zhang zhung languages (including scripts); and religion: Bon. Zhang zhung is believed to have existed relatively independently from its nemesis, the better known ‘Central Tibetan’ Yar lung dynasty, until about the 7th (according to the Old Tibetan Annals and Chronicles) or, alternatively, until the 8th century C.E. (based on the *Bon ma nub pa'i gtan tshigs* narrative).<sup>4</sup>

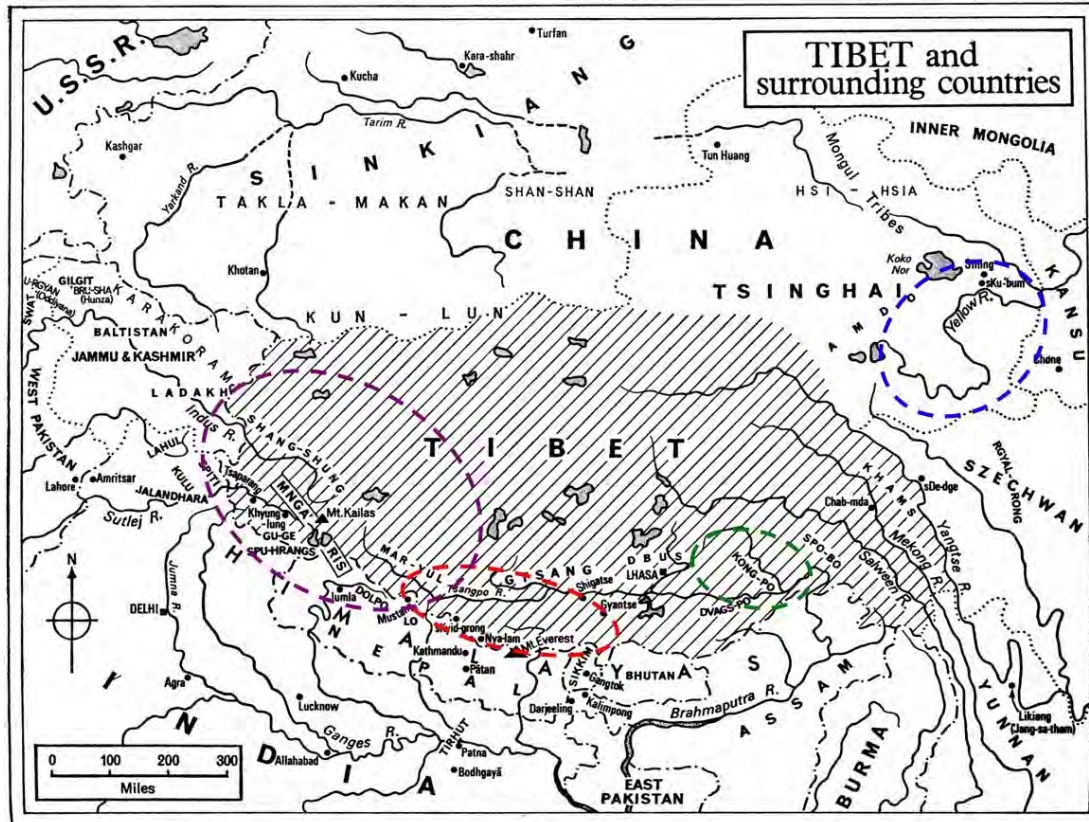
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<sup>3</sup> Ta zig is a generic designation in Tibetan sources for people of Arab or Persian origin. Etymologically, the most tempting hypothesis has always been Tajik-i-stan. Most scholars, however, consider a location in the general environs ancient Persia—so, not necessarily the parts that presently are known as Tajikistan. But, for now, the case simply has to remain underdetermined.

<sup>4</sup> See further discussion of this problem and pertinent sources in Blezer 2010b.

In historiographical analyses, traditional accounts of western origins of Bon appear problematic. This is what I should like to call the ‘paradox of the historiography of far western origins of Bon’. On the one hand, tropes of far-western origins of Bon in regions of Zhang zhung and ‘Ta zig’ appear to become thematic relatively late in Bon identity discourse: the grand narrative of western origins of Bon is demonstrably later than the historical beginnings of self-conscious Bon itself, in the early second diffusion or *phyi dar*. These western origins seem to become prominent only one or two generations after the inception of the first self-conscious Bon documents and have a notable and early appearance in the *Gling grags* cluster of historical narratives, which probably started to be compiled at around the late 11th or early 12th century C.E. Indeed, early self-consciously Bon narratives, such as we find in the *Mdo 'dus* and *Klu 'bum*, which probably were compiled starting the 10th–11th century C.E., almost completely ignore the names of Ta zig and Zhang zhung—names of near-mythic impact, which have become so intricately involved with later Bon identity—let alone develop the tropes of early origins of Bon in these areas. These earlier sources (*Mdo 'dus* and *Klu 'bum*) instead, are all about origins in 'Ol mo lung ring. (Blezer 2011c, 2012).

On the other hand, key narrative elements in the origin stories of Bon, such as the earliest traceable narrative elements for a founder and heartland of Bon that later Bon discourse engages in its narratives are, instead, traceable to areas that are located more centrally or even eastward in Tibet, such as, notably, several Skyi localities—some of which, in most intriguing ways, also are involved with tropes in Buddhist narratives or general Tibetan origin narratives—and which also are often involved with Rma clan names and narratives, in various ways (Blezer 2012, 2011c, and forthcoming).



In the above map, which is adjusted from Snellgrove (1987), the traditionally conceived Zhang zhung heartland of Bon,<sup>5</sup> is approximately delineated in purple, while the circles to the right, in red, green and blue colours, indicate various areas where proto-narratives of Bon (such as in Dunhuang sources) and the earliest Bon narratives (in the *Mdo 'dus*) point to. While the precise location that these narrative elements point to, more often than not, remains underdetermined, so much is clear, however, they do not point to western Tibet; some at best touch its eastern-most limits.

## Part II - The Aural Transmission from Zhang zhung: *Zhang zhung snyan brgyud*

### Cultural Translation from Zhang zhung and Ta zig

Implied in the grand narrative of western origins of Bon are ideas of cultural translation from Ta zig, from (and to) Zhang zhung, and eventually to Tibet. In this trope, the issue of a written language was also prone to come up, sooner or later. As said at the outset, this is not the right place exhaustively to trace the narratives, but as

<sup>5</sup> So not the various proposals for its full extent.

far as I can see now, these tropes on written Zhang zhung typically appear to be relatively late extrapolations—and by ‘late’ I mean really late, 20th century C.E. or something close to that; such as in, Yongs ‘dzin Rinpoche’s *Snga rabs bod kyi byung ba brjod pa’i ’bel gtam lung gi sning po*. Early materials, such as parts of the *Aural Transmission from Zhang zhung*, the *Zhang zhung snyan brgyud* (ZZNG), suggest that at the turn of the first millennium C.E. transmission and translation from Zhang zhung cultural areas still was an oral affair; but then, these are of course data from a lineage that self-advertises as an ‘Aural’ transmission. The ZZNG mainly contains tantric and Great Perfection teachings. It is notoriously difficult to put a handle on dates of lineage lamas of the ZZNG before its first known scribe, Yang ston chen po (late 11th century C.E.); for detailed annotation and references regarding this and the following summary see Blezer 2010a and 2011a.

### **Nye rgyud, The Near Transmission: Zhang zhung smar gyi grub chen drug**

We will now only take a closer look at some later narrativisations of concrete Bon transmissions from Zhang zhung, the so-called ‘near transmission’ of the six great adepts from Zhang zhung smar. We should pay particular attention to the name Zhang zhung smar, for it appears to resonate with two names for presumed Zhang zhung scripts, the so-called Smar chung and Smar chen. The transmission from Zhang zhung smar is characterised as a ‘near’ transmission because the legendary Snang bzher lod po (placed in the 7th or 8th centuries C.E.) presumably received the teachings transmitted in this lineage ‘directly’, from the mythic Ta pi hri tsa, in visions, without intervening masters. This juncture is the point where the lineage, at its last Master, Dpon chen btsan po, is said to emerge from Zhang zhung into Tibetan cultural areas, around the 9 to 10th century C.E. It thus is said to mediate his heritage to later Masters. Snang bzher lod po is said to be the receptacle of all the previous teachings and to have recorded the *Bka’ brgyud skor bzhi*, and therefore is the natural focal point and narrative centre of gravity of the ZZNG.

Dpon chen Btsan po is said to hail from the same Zhang zhung Gu rib/rub clan that Snang bzher lod po is also believed to be from. He forms an important link in the chain of transmission, with a special status, both as a focal point of group identity and as a lineage figure. He never gained the iconic status of Snang bzher lod po and he did not attract the mass of the latter’s ‘inner’ hagiographical narration or the momentum of his many entanglements with major events in Bon religious history. Instead, Dpon

chen Btsan po's hagiography reads like a slightly more elaborate version of the usual, basic, saintly story paradigm. Although Dpon chen btsan po represents a key juncture in the lineage, where the teachings emerge from the Zhang zhung cultural sphere of the six adepts of Zhang zhung Smar into the Tibetan world. While this surely is a momentous event of a major Bon translator or lotsawa, his crucial position between Zhang zhung and Tibetan cultural spheres almost goes unnoticed and is only implicit in the biographies of his Tibetan students: Dpon chen Lhun grub mu thur, of the Khyung po clan from Ra ring country and Gu ge Shes rab blo ldan, of the Snyel clan from Gu ge Nang khongs in Western Tibet.

It is mainly on these grounds that bonpo scholars such as Lopon Tenzin Namdak, and their followers, such as John M. Reynolds, nowadays presume that with Dpon chen btsan po the language of the *Zhang zhung snyan brgyud* shifted from Zhang zhung to Tibetan—whatever that Zhang zhung language may have been at the time: linguistically that is not yet clear at this point. Again, Dpon chen btsan po's own early biographies do not mention or even hint at that. In fact, as said, much of the narration on him appears in narratives regarding his students. Dpon chen btsan po is believed to have transmitted the oral and the experiential teachings separately: the oral ones via the Six Lamas of the Upper Transmission (*Bka' brgyud*) and the experiential ones via the Five Lamas of the Lower Transmission (*Snyan brgyud*); see Blezer 2010a and 2011a.

Tracing narratives and their framings back in time, for a bottom line for the inception of the foundational narratives and the re-construction of antecedents of Bon, the three pillars of Bon all converge at the turn of the first millennium C.E. or later. But all of them do indeed demonstrably recycle earlier materials, in revealing ways. It is thus our recurrent experience that antecedents in early self-consciously religious historical narratives appear construed, or at least 'emerge', with hindsight, at the turn of the first millennium C.E. We see them gradually emerge in the early *phyi dar*, apparently in response to developments among *Gsar ma* Buddhists and the subsequent coagulation of the *Rnying ma* folds as such (that is, as *rnying ma*, as opposed to *gsar ma*). This incidentally also provides some insight into the *manner* of construction of the narratives. For instance, a major and obvious historiographical strategy of Bon discourse is to claim and negotiate, in creative design, competing narratives, and earlier and more prestigious or mythically empowered dates for crucial events, than their Buddhist rivals can show.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This strategy is of course not new, for the Indian cultural realm, cf. Randall Collins (1998: 211).

### Part III - Takeuchi on Zhang zhung Languages

Takeuchi (2001 and 2009) distinguishes three main candidates for languages that might be referred to as Zhang zhung:<sup>7</sup>

- 1) Bon literary Zhang zhung, the language identified by the bonpos as the sacred tongue of their religion, which is primarily known from the bilingual edition of the *Srid pa'i mdzod phug*, but has been fragmentarily preserved elsewhere. He calls this 'New Zhang zhung'.
- 2) The language of five fragments written in Tibetan script found at Dunhuang Central Asian documents. Takeuchi calls this 'Old Zhang zhung'.
- 3) Spoken languages, dialects and 'surviving' lexicon western Tibet and neighbouring regions. Takeuchi cautions against including these linguistic data in 'Zhang zhung'.

The main source of data for 'New Zhang zhung', the sacred bonpo Zhang zhung language, is the bilingual Zhang zhung - Tibetan '*abhidharma*' text called *Srid pa'i mdzod phug* (see Martin 2000, 2010). In addition, there are titles, mantras and the like, and a large number of stray words, names and phrases that appear scattered in other Bon texts. The *Srid pa'i mdzod phug* and its commentary (traditionally dated to Dran pa Nam mkha', who is believed to have been active in the 8th century C.E.),<sup>8</sup> first appears into history as treasure texts (*gter ma*), in several finds, in the 11th century C.E., and—as usual—as a composition probably has to be dated to the time of its discovery.

The Bon or 'New' Zhang zhung does not convincingly look like a language: there seems to be too much lexicon and too little verbal system. Some, such as notably Rolf Stein (1971), have indeed doubted whether Bon Zhang zhung, in the form it is available to us now, represents a living, pre-10th century C.E. language, and argue that it is a mere lexicon, artificially cultivated by later bonpos, for ideological reasons, but that no doubt derives from earlier languages. Takeuchi moreover discovered that in Bon or 'New' Zhang zhung, relative to the Central Asian evidence, processes of Tibetanisation and Sanskritisation seem to have occurred in its lexicon: we see a gradual adaptation of words to languages better known in Tibet.

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<sup>7</sup> What follows mainly is a brief resume of major scholarly work by Takeuchi and his collaborators.

<sup>8</sup> Bonpos, in various narratives, distinguish several Dran pa Nam mkha'; they may be legendary figures.

The Central Asian documents are among the texts that were serendipitously discovered at the beginning of the 20th century (1907), and later were collected by Sir Aurel Stein, Paul Pelliot, and others in a remote, north-eastern corner of Tibet, in the so-called 'Library' Cave #17, in Dunhuang, Eastern Turkestan, in the western end of present-day Gansu province; somewhat off-centre to western Tibet. Five fragments of documents so far have been identified: three by F.W. Thomas, in the thirties of the previous century, and two more recently by Takeuchi. They may date to the late 8th or early 9th century C.E. They are written in Tibetan script but represent a different language. These texts seem to have medical or veterinarian content. Upon closer analysis, they appear to contain a colloquial language, which seems lexically related but not identical to Bon literary Zhang zhung. The Zhang zhung language of these documents appears to be a Tibeto-Burman language that is related to the Western Himalayan branch of languages, such as Kanauri, Rangpa, Bunan, and Byangsi. By all appearances this type of Zhang zhung is a dead language (but see the next point).

The spoken languages and dialects and also 'surviving' lexicon in the larger Western Tibetan area Takeuchi (2009) prefers not to call Zhang zhung. Yet, they play an important role in identifying Zhang zhung lexicon. According to Takeuchi, comparison with Eastern Tibeto-Burman languages, such as Gyarong, Minyag, and Newari, should also be considered. According to Lupon Tenzin Namdak several Tibetan dialects along the Tibet-Nepal border contain many Zhang zhung loan-words (cited in Takeuchi 2009).

Takeuchi's hypothesis is that the presumed medical lore from Zhang zhung that was recorded in Tibetan script on the above-mentioned documents ('Old' Zhang zhung) migrated with mercenaries from Zhang zhung areas. According to the Old Tibetan Annals, after the fall of Zhang zhung in the 7th century (633/34) C.E., these troops were recruited from their Zhang zhung homeland in 662/63 C.E. and taken to the Kokonor area by the Tibetan Great Minister, to fight the 'A zha (see Beckwith 1987: 29). These various Zhang zhung peoples may have stayed on in this North-Eastern corner of Tibet, and by the time that the Tibetan Empire occupied Dunhuang and the Gansu corridor (early 2nd half 8th century C.E.), they may have ended up in Dunhuang as well. There their Zhang zhung lore may have been recorded in Tibetan writing; as far as records go, perhaps for the first time in history. In that case it should be noted that these Zhang zhung people, at that time, i.e., shortly after the fall of Zhang zhung in the late 8th early 9th century C.E., apparently did not yet know how to write, let alone know how to write in a Zhang zhung script.

There is another hypothesis that seems more frugal and entirely plausible, and that is that the language of these documents in fact originates in Eastern Tibet. This theory still needs to be substantiated, from a linguistic point of view; this would not be the proper place to anticipate such an argument.<sup>9</sup>

## Part IV - Zhang zhung-related Scripts: Writing in Zhang zhung and Ta zig

The scripts most often depicted in bonpo documents or inscribed on buildings and the like are of the Smar chung and Smar chen type; both scripts supposedly are from Zhang zhung; the Dpungs chung and Dpungs chen scripts are said to be from Ta zig; and Bru sha from Gilgit. But, occasionally, further scripts are mentioned as well, such as: Drag yig, Lha bab yi ge, Srin yig, several Gter yig, and others still. For many of these scripts it is uncertain when they appeared and whether they were ever used in written texts. So far, the samples that we actually have in hand for the first four mentioned scripts are no more than one or a few centuries old, and much of the data come from Tibetan equivalents of ‘abecedaries’ or *varṇamālā* (*ka ‘phreng*) rather than from texts or inscriptions. The oldest sample of a *ka ‘phreng* presently known to me appears in the Sde srid MS (on p.306, f.124r).<sup>10</sup> To my knowledge, only one sample of possibly early *in situ* use of any of these four scripts is known, and that is an undated seal, supposedly in Smar chen script, attributed to the last king of Zhang zhung, Lig myi rhya, and presently kept in the abbot’s quarters in Menri, the Sman ri bla brang, in exile. The Drag yig script is mentioned relatively early, in the 12th century C.E. *Ma rgyud* commentary *sGom ‘grel nyi ma’i snying po* (attributed to Gu ru rnon rtse, b. 1136 C.E.). The text was originally written in Drag yig, ‘mixed’ with Tibetan script. A sample is shown in Lopon Tenzin Namdak’s *‘Bel gtam gyi snying po*, on p.28, photo-mechanically reproduced from the commentary (cf. Martin 1994: 28ff). The text was ‘copied’ in ‘pure’ (Tibetan) script. The context suggests that no translation was involved, only transliteration.

Needless to say, all extant Zhang zhung-related scripts are phonologically based and, like the Brāhmī/Gupta and Tibetan *dbu can* and *dbu med* scripts, are typologically

<sup>9</sup> For discussions on possible Eastern Tibetan connections of Zhangzhung-related languages, see Hummel (e.g. 1986), but also Nagano 2009 and Jacques 2009.

<sup>10</sup> See Christoph Cüppers, Leonard van der Kuijp, and Ulrich Pagel 2012.



alphasyllabaries or rather syllabic alphabets, in Sanskrit terminology called *varṇamālā* (cf. Tibetan *ka 'phreng*).<sup>11</sup>

## Part V - Zhang chung Smar chung

As already indicated by Andrew West (*BabelStone*) and later again by Sam van Schaik (2011), Smar chung scripts are evidently informed by Tibetan *dbu can* (Table I); our work independently confirms this. In fact, the patterns of similarity and derivation for Smar chung, Smar chen, Spungs chung and Spungs chen are so obvious that it would seem superfluous to credit the discovery; apparently it is obvious to most observers.<sup>12</sup> The fact that Andrew West, Sam van Schaik, and members of our team, more or less independently (or in agreement), reached similar conclusions on the major lines of derivation underlines this. The utility of this exposé lies in a detailed discussion, contextualisation, and more elaborate presentation of the scripts in tables, not in reporting the discovery of these (and other) dependencies.

Smar chung, in its extant recent samples, typically frames Tibetan letters by means of a limited number of structures, above and/or to the right. Sometimes, small parts are omitted, in a stylised manner (e.g., KA and KHA—but cf. the Srin yig sample; cf. also Smar chen). To aid recognition, we have added extracts from Table I with graphical highlights in colour below.

The *tsheg* (or *shad*), the V-shaped hook to the right, seems to be unstable, sometimes it looks like it is included in the frame or letter. In some *ka 'phreng* this seems to result in additional, imaginatively rendered and often familiar-looking graphemes, which are usually super-scribed or added to the right of the letter. Especially the framing structures to the right therefore often are unstable. See, for example, the letter YA in the table below. The vertical lines to the right seem to

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<sup>11</sup> See Daniels 1996 and, for the term “syllabic alphabets” instead of “alphasyllabaries”, see Houben & Rath 2012: 9, n.23.

<sup>12</sup> From the way things are phrased in Sam van Schaik’s article, I am not sure whether at the moment of writing he was aware of Andrew West’s earlier on-line publication of similar conclusions and of the discussion with West on the *Zhang chung Studies Forum*, preceding that. I therefore tend to read this as two more independent witnesses.

multiply into a four-legged super-*ya*, while the initial curl, in what seem to be the oldest samples, invites a unique rendering as a *la* in the Beijing Smar chung. The oldest samples for the *YA* (van Manen, Everding, and Lokesh Chandra) indeed seem to suggest an Indic Gupta or even a later *devanāgarī*-like *ya* or even *tha* as a *Vorlage*. Based on the evidence we have, the best hypothesis would be that there apparently was confusion among calligraphers or among creators or copyist of *ka 'phreng* about the inclusion of the *tsheg* in the letter; but given the limited samples, this is not certain.

There is moreover a certain level of convergence detectable, both in parts and in whole, with known Tibetan, but occasionally also Indic scripts. Very frequent is a small compressed *nga*, which often emerges as an artifact in the framing, on top of the graphs (examples passim). With the unstable vertical connector this also occasionally morphs into a *ra mgo* and even a *la mgo* (Beijing Dmar chung), in the 'Beijing' samples. But the latter samples tend to be somewhat atypical, particularly the Beijing Dmar chung.

The Beijing Dmar chung tends to move graphemes toward known or imaginary *dbu can* (e.g. *NGA—lŋa*, *CA—rtsa*, *CHA—\*rcha*, *JA—\*rjha*, *NYA—lha*, *TA—\*t-ha*, *DA—dha*, *MA—kṣa* (sic!), *TSA—rtsa*, *TSHA—rtsha*, *DZA—rdzha*, *'A—ba* (sic!), *HA \*ng-ha*) letter combinations that bear resemblance and even to letters from Indic scripts. The Dmar chung depicted in the *Cha tshad kyi bris dpe dpyod ldan yid gsos* MS,<sup>13</sup> initiated around 1687 by the *sde srid*, Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho (1653–1705),<sup>14</sup> bears a strong family resemblance to the Beijing Dmar chung that has been included here in the tables.<sup>15</sup> The *Sde srid* MS Dmar chen looks more like a variety of Smar chung than like Smar chen, as does, in fact, the Beijing Dmar chen.<sup>16</sup> Since the *Sde srid* MS is the earliest we have, it might put a *post quem* date for Smar chen, as we know it from other sources; but it would be hazardous to argue for this late dating, based on a single MS sample, which moreover has been preserved in a Buddhist environment. The *Sde srid* MS and the Beijing Dmar chen and Dmar chung samples both seem to be closely related, to the point of being copies of each other, the Beijing samples then most likely being later renderings of those on the *Sde srid* MS; all four samples show the same, striking tendencies toward tibetanisation.

<sup>13</sup> Christoph Cüppers, Leonard van der Kuijp, and Ulrich Pagel 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Also involved were: Lho brag Sku skye Nor bu rgya mtsho, Rgyal rtse 'Jam dbyangs dbang po, and Ngam ring Sangs rgyas chos grags.

<sup>15</sup> We therefore have not included this additional sample. If the publication of the *Sde Srid* MS had appeared in print earlier, we would probably have opted for including these samples in the comparative tables rather than the Beijing ones.

<sup>16</sup> These so-called 'Dmar chen' varieties of Smar chung were not included in the tables.






























Even a *ha btags* occasionally shows up, mostly in the Beijing samples, which generally appear somewhat deviating, especially in the somewhat eccentric Beijing Dmar chung; one time, it looks like a misreading of a curvy *dbu med*-style *da* suspended from its Smar chung framing (DA) as a HA (but it may appear on other grounds), more often apparently for other reasons (JA, NYA, TA, DZA ZHA).





























































Note the curious similarity of the graphemes SA and HA in the oldest samples (that is, the Van Manen, Everding, and Lokesh Chandra samples) and note the interesting X-like grapheme for 'A.

Extant occurrences of Smar chung in texts, more often than not, appear to be ornamental. It should be noted that they moreover usually transliterate Tibetan titles rather than Zhang zhung; see some samples with added transliteration in Table VI (the samples are from Dolanji MSs, reproduced in Everding 2001). Sometimes Smar chung letters also appears purely as manuscript illuminations and ornaments, without any apparent meaning. This appears rather frequently in the most recent editions of the Bon canon.

Table of Zhangzhung sMar chung scripts

CONSONANTS







































































ROMAN	DBU MED	DBU CAN	VAN MANEN	EVERDING	LOKESH CHANDRA	CHAPHUR	SHERAB NYIMA	SHERAB NYIMA (SRIN YIG)	BEIJING (SMAR CHUNG)	BEIJING (DMAR CHUNG)
KA				 JS 2782						
KHA				 JS 2745						
GA				 JS 1960						
NGA				 JS 2110						
CA				 JS 2825						

CHA				 JS 2825						
JA				 JS 2858						
NYA				 JS 2825						
TA				 JS 2826						
THA				 JS 2110a						
DA				 JS 2670						

NA				 JS 2670						
PA				 JS 2858						
PHA				 JS 2679						
BA				 JS 2826						
MA				 JS 2858						
TSA										



TSHA				 JS 2656						
DZA				 JS 2110a						
WA										
ZHA				 JS 2858						
ZA				 JS 2110						
'A				 JS 2110						

YA				 JS 2858						
RA				 JS 2825						
LA				 JS 2670						
SHA				 JS 2780						
SA				 JS 1960						
HA				 JS 2670						
A				 JS 2110						

## Part VI - Zhang zhung Smar chen

As also indicated by West and van Schaik, Smar chen seems to be informed by Tibetan *dbu can* as well, but in somewhat more complex ways (see Table II). The letters and graphs look *g-yung drung*-ised *dbu can* script (see DBU, NYA, SA, and HA (only in Lokesh Chandra), but also KHA and DZA (e.g., Lokesh Chandra and Zhang zhung Dictionary).

For some letters the derivation is obvious, such as for KA, KHA, GA, and NGA; often one connecting line is missing, in a sort of stylised way, such as the right vertical one in the KHA (if one would remove the *ra mgo* framing and add the vertical connector one would have a regular Tibetan KHA). Note the framing headline above or to the right in all cases and the occasionally added elements, such as the hook below at GA and, incidentally, also at KHA (Zhang zhung Dictionary sample). Some are also less obvious, such as, CA, TA, DA, and NA, but are nonetheless fairly easy to relate to Tibetan *dbu can*, given the calligraphic conventions and constrictions (consider, for instance, the rendering of the CA grapheme).

Note the convergence of the upper framing parts to more familiar-looking *ra mgo*, at NGA, CHA, TSHA and, somewhat more incidentally, at several other graphs as well. The vertical connector being typically unstable in this *g-yung drung*-isation of Smar chen, the upper framing is also occasionally realised as a compressed *nga*-like structure, see for instance JA, SA, and HA; this design pattern we have encountered much more frequently in the Smar chung-type scripts. A vertically flipped *nga*, with the ‘unstable’ vertical connector moved toward the right side, also occurs (e.g., YA).

There seems to be a system to it all. Similar letters in one ‘class’, such as, CA, CHA, and JA, often are variants of each other. It will not be necessary to explain that in words, as it can easily be gleaned from the tables. The first in its class usually relates best to the Tibetan, while the others show slight variations of the previous, such as, inversions of parts or of the frame, or different linkage to the framing structures (e.g., TSA and TSHA, which frame the same identifying structure slightly differently. The related class TSA, TSHA and DZA, again, shows slight variations of CA, CHA, and JA. Similar patterns can be observed for other classes as well. This need not necessarily point to artifice. Note the unique convergence of BA and MA in Hummel’s sample: the identifying element looks like a *ma*, in *dbu med*, rotated 90 degrees and flipped between BA and MA.

Sometimes, parts of Smar chen letters, in later convergence and dissimilation, appear close to known (also *dbu med*) Tibetan forms, also rotated and flipped (thus an

appended *ra* and *'a* appear at CHA and JA in Lokesh Chandra, *Zhang zhung Dictionary* and Beijing Smar chen). Occasionally, also a wholesale reframing of a known Tibetan *dbu can* letter is known to occur (see, for instance, the letter “A”).

See also the similarity of CA, ZHA and RA, and TSA, TSHA, DZA and SHA; especially when the vertical connector line is moved (and, as said, that line indeed seems to be relatively ‘unstable’).

For this script we actually have a short piece of text, the aforementioned royal seal that is said to have belonged to a Lig myi rhya King. Considering that both Smar varieties are informed by Tibetan *dbu can*, one would expect the seal at least to postdate Tibetan *dbu can*.

### The ‘Zhang zhung’ Royal Seal of Lig myi rhya (Smar chen)

The seal, depicted at the beginning of this article has most recently been discussed on the *Zhang zhung Studies Forum* and Andrew West later publicised his conclusions on his blogspot, *BabelStone*;<sup>17</sup> there you will also find a useful table with the readings and corrections by Lopon Tenzin Namdak and those suggested by Andrew West. A print of the seal was originally published by Lopon Tenzin Namdak (*Bel gtam gyi snying po*, p.28) and was later again reprinted in *Bon sgo* (Vol.8 (1995), p.55) and elsewhere.

Interestingly, even though the readings are vastly different and only three out of seven or eight syllables are certain, both scholars arrive at the same translation ... One might question the decision of Andrew West to emend the reading of the seal based on extant, late *ka 'phreng*. The seal might well be the oldest evidence we have, older and more authentic than the *ka 'phreng*. In any case, one would need to know more about the provenance of the seal and the source of Lopon Tenzin Namdak’s reading and his reasons for ‘translating’ or emending the text the way he does.

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<sup>17</sup> See <http://babelstone.blogspot.com/search/label/Zhang%20Zhung>.

Reading Lupon Tenzin Namdak:

Zhang zhung: KHA (THA?)-TSHAN PA-SHANG LIG-ZHI RA-TSA/  
Tib.: thams cad dbang bsgyur (dbang sdud) srid pa'i rgyal po  
The King of the World, Who Rules All

Reading Andrew West (*BabelStone*):

Zhang zhung: KHA-M-N (KHA-MUN?) PA-SHANG LIG-CI WAR (WER)/  
Tib.: 'dod khams dbang sdud srid pa'i rgyal po  
King of Life, Wielding Power over the World of Sensual  
Pleasures

## Part VII - Ta zig: Spungs so chung ba, Spungs so che ba and Bru sha (Gilgit)

As also argued by Andrew West (*BabelStone*) and later again by Sam van Schaik (2011), Spungs chen seems to derive in a rather straightforward manner from Lan dza/Lan ts(h)a,<sup>18</sup> Spungs chung likewise from Wartu or Vartu scripts. This is again confirmed also by our independent comparisons: see for instance KA, KHA, GA, and CA, in Table III). The main distinguishing feature between these two main groups is a straight headline for Spungs chen and Lan tsha as opposed to a wavy one for the Spungs chung and Vartu varieties.

As can be seen in Table IV, Bru sha also seems to relate to Lan tsha; but note that the graphemes for KHA and GA seem to be reversed in the Alay Brusha MS, relative to Spungs chen. This Bru sha script shows no apparent connections to known Gilgit Sanskrit scripts (see some samples of Eastern Gupta in Table IV, from Dutta, 1939).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> While Lan tsha script is very familiar from ornamental titles to Buddhist manuscripts, also for those that were not translated from Indic languages, I am not familiar with its important role in treasure texts, as argued by van Schaik 2011: 67. On Lan tsha and Vartu see, e.g., Rath 2011: 198.

<sup>19</sup> Although the find spot (Gilgit) is in the North West, these MSs contain Eastern Gupta variety of scripts (5th–6th century C.E.). N.B., Śāradā is much later (8th century C.E.) and is of a Western Gupta variety.



The use of Lan tsha and Vartu scripts in Tibet probably is not to be dated earlier than 11th century C.E.; long after the relevant Zhang chung period. The narrative in the MS publicized by Alay indicates that the scripts presented there were systematised by Kun grol grags pa (b. 1700), a well-known Gsar bon figure of Eastern Tibet (also cf. Alay 2010). They are said to originate with Gling gshen Mu la (thogs med) in Sku bla rmog mtho, by prophecy of Tshe dbang (rig 'dzin). Gling gshen Mu la is made a contemporary of the legendary Stong rgyung Mthu chen, so supposedly of the late Zhang chung period (as said, bonpos believe the final days of Zhang chung were in the 8th rather than in the 7th century C.E.). Stong rgyung Mthu chen is believed to have been involved in cultural translation of Bon—but note that this is long before Bon as we now know it arose, in the early *phyi dar*.

Could these conventions of using Zhang chung scripts perhaps even be typically *gter gsar* and subsequent Gsar bon invented traditions or at least be traditions thoroughly reinterpreted by them? Perhaps we are looking at a convenient legitimising adjunct to their controversial *gter gsar* traditions: an effort at retraditionalising one of the, reputedly at least, least traditional systems within the Bon folds?

## Part VIII - Indic Scripts

Inscriptions and manuscripts of Buddhist content, in Prakritic or Sanskrit language and in regional languages, and written in Siddhamāṭṛkā and in other Indic scripts, were produced not only in India but in a large area of Central Asia stretching from Gandhāra (to the north-west of India), to 'Eastern Turkestan' (Xinjiang, north of India) and Yunnan (to the north-east of India), for several centuries from the early centuries C.E. onwards (see for instance: Liebenthal 1947, Sander 1968, Salomon 1999). The intensive use and transportation of manuscripts in Indian scripts in this period is well-attested (van Gulik 1956, Rath 2006, 2011) and is continuous with an intensive manuscript culture in the Indian realm from the same early period onwards (Houben & Rath 2012). A detailed comparison between Zhang chung and early north Indic scripts is therefore called for, whatever exact historical relationship they may have. It is found that both Tibetan script (in both the *dbu can* and *dbu med* variety) and varieties of Zhang chung show considerable affinities with ancient scripts from north-east India (rather than those from the north-west). It is in this connection interesting to note that, as shown in Sander 1968, the use of scripts from north-east India extended in north-western

direction far into Central Asia. The chronology and mutual relationships of the Indic scripts are relatively well-established, and can be represented in the form of a tree-diagram (see Table Va). Against this background, Zhang zhung shows most affinity with the older Indic scripts from late eastern Gupta onwards. This says something about the *post quem* date and the regional orientation, but not about the *ante quem* date of origin of Zhang zhung scripts, as we have to take into account the possibility of an archaizing creation of a later period and as the influence of one script on another may have been mediated through another script. Referring to Table V, several systematic affinities between the characters of the north-eastern group of Indic scripts (including Lan tsha and Vartu), Tibetan and Zhang zhung can be noticed, for instance:

- The GA in column 2 and 3 (early and late Gupta), 4 and 5 (Tibetan *dbu can* and *dbu med*) is very similar to the Zhang zhung script in column 9 (van Manen Smar chung) and to the Oriya script, column 16. The van Manen Smar chung character looks like an angular form of the corresponding rounded Oriya character.
- The CA in columns 1, 2 and 3 (Brahmi, early and late Gupta) is very similar to 4 (Tibetan *dbu can*) and to the Zhang zhung script in Alay's MS column 6 (character without the right-hand vertical bar), and this one again to columns 11, 12, 14, 15 (Ranjana, Lan tsha, Bengali and Maithili); the curvy style variant in column 7 is similar to columns 13 and 16 (Vartu and Oriya).
- The HA in column 3 (late Gupta) is similar to the character in columns 4 and 5 (Tibetan *dbu can* and *dbu med*), Zhang zhung of Alay's MS in columns 6–7 and the eastern Indic scripts of columns 11–14 (Ranjana, Lan tsha, Vartu and Bengali).

## Part IX - Some Preliminary Conclusions

There is no evidence that Zhang zhung scripts were ever used in the Zhang zhung period (that is, in the period up till the 7th or 8th century C.E.). No written texts or any other evidence for use of the scripts has turned up yet that can be dated with certainty to a time before the late 17th century C.E., but most samples probably are 19th century C.E. or later, the earliest datable evidence so far is a *ka 'phreng* on a MS from the Buddhist environment of the *sde srid* Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, with a somewhat deviating Dmar chen and Dmar chung script, datable to around 1687 C.E. Our only

possibly early 'document' is the purportedly ancient seal that is of uncertain provenance and date and, as of yet, has to remain of uncertain content as well. The major obstacle in developing a solid argument is the lack of reliably early sources and *in situ* use of the scripts. Nearly every new find of an early sample could potentially change the landscape considerably; the following conclusions therefore have to remain very preliminary.

- Smar chung scripts are informed by Tibetan *dbu can* (they are simply reframed forms of Tibetan *dbu can* letters).
- Smar chen scripts usually add *g-yung drung* patterns, or merely framing (often looking like *\*nga mgo* or *ra mgo*) to familiar *dbu can* Tibetan forms and improvise variations for forming letters from the same or similar classes. The absence of the later more regular form of smar chen from the Sde srid MS, may put an date *post quem* for Smar chen as we know it from other sources, as the Sde srid MS is the earliest dated evidence that we presently have; but it is hazardous to argue for this thesis based on a single sample, moreover preserved in a Buddhist environment.
- Spungs chen for Zhang zhung follows Buddhist conventions of using Lan tsha for Sanskrit mainly in ornamental titles. But this transpired long after the Zhang zhung period, in any case after the 11th century C.E.
- Spungs chung is similarly inspired on the Vartu variety of ornamental script.
- Bru sha, supposedly from eponymous Gilgit, also mainly follows the Lan tsha design; there are no apparent resonances with any known Gilgit Sanskrit and Prakrit scripts.

Multi-directional similarities with other scripts are apparent. These may likely have originated from misunderstandings through the intervention of calligraphers. Moreover, many convergences with Tibetan letters and stacks and Sanskrit ligatures and letters are apparent. When this occurs, calligraphers apparently recycle known letters, mostly from Tibetan, but occasionally also from Indic scripts. They preferably employ script specimens that were around in Tibet and that may have looked

somewhat unfamiliar to Tibetans; unknown indeed, they may have appeared like genuinely foreign scripts. There are many inconsistencies apparent in the policy of inclusion or exclusion in the design of the letter of the syllable marker, the *tsheg* (or perhaps the *shad*, but probably the former); we hypothesise that, over time, this may have led to all kinds of additions and changes to letters.

Based on the evidence that has surfaced so far, systematised Zhang zhung scripts look to be invented traditions, or at least thoroughly reinterpreted traditions, of no more than several centuries old: significantly later than the ancient Zhang zhung period and, of course, not later than our present sources, which probably have to be dated somewhere around the 19th century C.E., with one exception in the late 17th century C.E. Needless to say, an ad hoc design rather than a gradual, organic development, of a new script is well-known in the Tibetan and Central Asian world, see for instance the creation of the 'Phags pa script in the 13th century, under royal patronage; cf. also the Lepcha script in the early 18th century C.E. (van der Kuijp 1996: 436–40). Based on what little narrative historical evidence that we have (from the Alay MS), Zhang zhung scripts may even be a specific Gter gsar and later also Gsar bon-fueled re-traditionalisation, connected to Gter gsar-style Bon *gter ma* traditions.

In extant narratives, the Drag yig script is first described as if it were a type of Gter yig. Existing practices and conventions concerning Gter yig may well have been the raw materials for later systematisations of some so-called Zhang zhung scripts, such as of the Spungs chen script by Kun grol grags pa. One might therefore speculate that the design, use and systematisation of Zhang zhung-scripts was primarily a concern of *gter ston* figures, perhaps even starting in Gter gsar and Bon gsar circles, where it originally may have related to coding and decoding *gter ma* revelations and only later was engaged for the employment of those fantastic and captivating narratives about a remote Zhang zhung Golden Age. There are numerous family resemblances, particularly of Smar chung with various types of Gter yig and Mkha' 'gro brda yig. These still need to be charted out systematically. But that is a task that also has to await further research and cannot be covered in a preliminary survey such as this.

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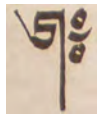

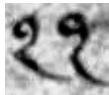
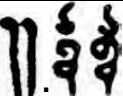

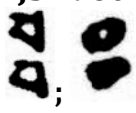











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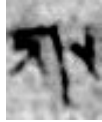








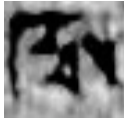







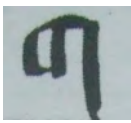

















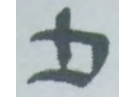
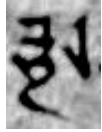






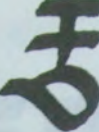









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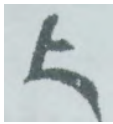






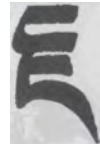









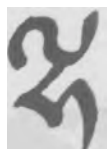

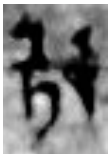



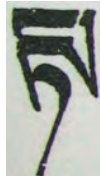


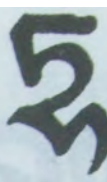
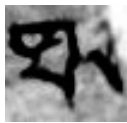



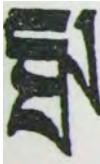


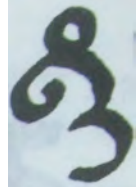








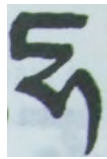
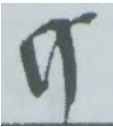








TABLE I: SMAR CHUNG (VOWELS)

ROMAN	DBU CAN	DBU MED	VAN MANEN	EVERDING	LOKESH CHANDRA	CHAPHUR	SHERAB NYIMA	SHERAB NYIMA SRIN YIG	BEIJING SMAR CHUNG	BEIJING DMAR CHUNG
DBU				 JS 2656						X
SHAD/ DANḌA	or   oio			 JS 2110  JS 1960  JS 2826;2670  JS 2858  JS 2745  JS 2780	२	१				X
I	ॐ		 གི	 གི JS 2655	 གི	 གི	 ཞི	X	X	X

U	ུ་		 ུ་	 ུ་ JS 2656	 ུ་	 ུ་	 ུ་	X	X	X
E	ེ་		 ེ་	 ེ་ JS 2655	 ེ་	 ེ་	 ེ་	X	X	X
O	ོ་		 ོ་	 ོ་ JS 2655	 ོ་	 ོ་	 ོ་	X	X	X

TABLE I: SMAR CHUNG (CONSONANTS)

ROMAN	DBU CAN	DBU MED	VAN MANEN	EVERDING	LOKESH CHANDRA	CHAPHUR	SHERAB NYIMA	SHERAB NYIMA SRIN YIG	BEIJING SMAR CHUNG	BEIJING DMAR CHUNG
KA	ཀ་			 JS 2782						
KHA	ཁ་			 JS 2745						
GA	ག་			 JS 1960						
NGA	ང་			 JS 2110						
CA	ཅ་			 JS 2825						
CHA	ཆ་			 JS 2825						

JA	ཇ་			 JS 2858						
NYA	ཉ་			 JS 2825						
TA	ཏ་			 JS 2826						
THA	ཐ་			 JS 2110a						
DA	ད་			 JS 2670						
NA	ན་			 JS 2670						



PA	𑀧			 JS 2858						
PHA	𑀨			 JS 2679						
BA	𑀩			 JS 2826						
MA	𑀪			 JS 2858						
TSA	𑀫									
TSHA	𑀬			 JS 2656						
DZA	𑀭			 JS 2110a						



WA	ཨ་									
ZHA	ཅ་			 JS 2858						
ZA	ཇ་			 JS 2110						
'A	ཉ་			 JS 2110						
YA	ཏ་			 JS 2858						
RA	ཐ་			 JS 2825						
LA	ཌ་			 JS 2670						

SHA	𑀓			𑀓 JS 2780						
SA	𑀔			𑀔 JS 1960						
HA	𑀕			𑀕 JS 2670						
A	𑀖			𑀖 JS 2110						
RKA	𑀗									
LKA	𑀘									
SKA	𑀙									

KYA										
KRA										
KWA										
KYU										
KRU										

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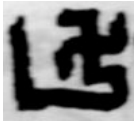














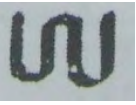
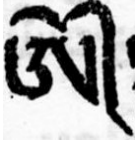



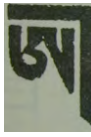
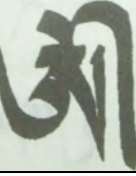













CHAPHUR: *Yig gzugs du ma'i ma phyi gzhon nu mdzes pa'i lang tsho*, Bya phur Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, pp.11ff., Dolanji: Bon Monastic Centre, (1994).

SHERAB NYIMA: *Yig rigs ma phyi mkhas dgu'i mdzes rgyan, Yig rigs brgya yi ma phyi 'dzam gling mkhas dgu'i mdzes rgyan phyogs las rnam rgyal*, by sNang rgyal A ti Shes rab nyi ma, pp.303–307, published by Bod gzhung shes rig las khungs, Delhi (2003).

BEIJING (SMAR CHUNG): *Bod kyi yig rnying zhib 'jug*, p.803ff., Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing (2003).

**Note:** In the Zhangzhung script table by Andrew West (see table 3), there are two different scripts listed as Zhangzhung sMar chung script (sMar chung A (i.e. from Lokesh Chandra, p.60) and sMar chung B (i.e. from Sherab Nyima, pp.310f.)). However, the latter is not identified as sMar chung by the author of the book, Sherab Nyima, but he instead identifies it as *Zhang zhung gi gter yig*. For unknown reasons, Andrew West did not list the sMar chung by Sherab Nyima (i.e. from pp.303–307) in his table. It is not sure how Andrew came to identify that script as sMar chung script, probably he did not have access to Sherab Nyima's book. Therefore, the sMar chung B (according to Andrew West) is not included in this table. There is a script called *Srin yig* in the same book by Sherab Nyima (p.232), which seems to be interesting to compare with the sMar chung scripts.

TABLE II: SMAR CHEN (VOWELS &amp; CONJUNCTS)

ROMAN	1 DBU CAN	2 DBU MED	3 ZZ SEAL sMar chen	4 ZZ Dictionar y sMar chen	5 HUMMEL sMar chen	6 LOKESH CHANDRA sMar chen	7 CHAPHUR sMar chen	8 BON SGO 8 sMar chen	9 SHERAB NYIMA sMar chen	10 BEIJING sMar chen
DBU										
SHAD/ DANḌA										
A										
AUM	 cf. 									
KI			 li ci							

KĪ										
KU										
KE										
KO GO										
KYA (BYA)										
KRA/ MRA SRU										
KLA KLU										



KVA	ᳵ᳚						ᳵ᳚	ᳵ᳚		
RKA	ᳵ᳚						ᳵ᳚	ᳵ᳚	ᳵ᳚	
RKYA								ᳵ᳚		
LKA	ᳵ᳚						ᳵ᳚	ᳵ᳚	ᳵ᳚	
SKA	ᳵ᳚						ᳵ᳚	ᳵ᳚	ᳵ᳚	
SKRA(U)	ᳵ᳚			ᳵ᳚			ᳵ᳚	ᳵ᳚		
SKYA	ᳵ᳚						ᳵ᳚			






TABLE II: sMAR CHEN (CONSONANTS)







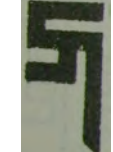


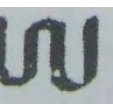




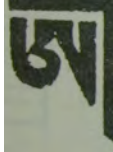
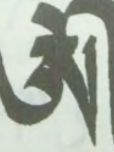
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
ROMAN	DBU CAN	DBU MED	ZZ SEAL sMar chen	ZZ Dictionary sMar chen	HUMMEL sMar chen	LOKESH CHANDRA sMar chen	CHAPHUR sMar chen	BON SGO 8 sMar chen	SHERAB NYIMA sMar chen	BEIJING sMar chen
DBU										
SHAD/ DANḌA										
KA										
KHA										
GA										
NGA										

CA	ཅ་		ཁི (Ci)							
CHA	ཆ་									
JA	ཇ་									
NYA	ཉ་									
TA	ཏ་									
THA	ཐ་									
DA	ད་									
NA	ན་									



PA	པ་									
PHA	ཕ་									
BA	བ་									
MA	མ་									
TSA	ཅ་									
TSHA	ཇ་									
DZA	ཇ་									
WA	འ་									

ZHA	ཞ་									
ZA	ཞ་									
'(A)	ཞ་									
YA	ཞ་									
RA	ཞ་									
LA	ཞ་									
SHA	ཞ་									
SA	ཞ་									

HA										
A										

## References

ZZ SEAL (Namdak 1997/1983, p.28 and *Bon sgo*, Vol.8 (1995), p.55).

NAMKHAI NORBU, *dBu med*, pp.44f., Dharamsala 1984 (1981).

ZZ Dictionary: Zhu yi Rnal 'byor Nyi ma grags pa, Sgra yi don sdeb snang gsal sgron me (added English title: Tibetan Zhang Zhung Dictionary), pp.1–22, Delhi (1965).

LOKESH CHANDRA, *Indian Scripts in Tibet*. Reproduced by Lokesh Chandra from the Collection of Prof. Raghuvira, p.60, New Delhi (1982).

CHAPHUR: *Yig gzugs du ma'i ma phyi gzhon nu mdzes pa'i lang tsho*, pp.7–9, by Bya phur Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, Dolanji: Bon Monastic Centre, (1994).

HUMMEL, Zhang zhung smar yig che, *On Zhang zhung*, p.21, (2000).

BON SGO 8, (*shes rig, bon gyi yig rigs nang nas rdzib gzugs*), (1995), p.86.











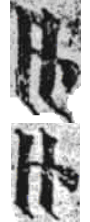







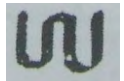


















SHERAB NYIMA, *Yig rigs ma phyi mkhas dgu'i mdzes rgyan, Yig rigs brgya yi ma phyi 'dzam gling mkhas dgu'i mdzes rgyan phyogs las rnam rgyal*, by sNang rgyal A ti Shes rab nyi ma, pp.310–31, published by Bod gzhung shes rig las khungs, Delhi (2003).

BEIJING (sMar chen) *Bod kyi yig rnying zhib 'jug*, p.804, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing (2003).

## Notes

1. From this chart it looks like the characters in sMar chen in the texts of SHERAB NYIMA, BON SGO 8, CHAPHUR and ZZ SEAL (columns 9, 8, 7, 3) form a single category (“square variety”); the next four columns (6, 3, 5, and 10) in the texts of LOKESH CHANDRA (taken from the work of Prof. Raghuvira, and his source is not known), ZZ Dictionary, HUMMEL, BEIJING (dMar chen) seem to form a different category (“slightly cursive” or “slightly rounded variety”); the first category (“square variety”) is internally more homogeneous, the second category is more heterogeneous.
2. The style in ZZ Dictionary (Column 3) work seems to turn towards a type of cursive which is usually seen when the material is not stone or (copper, silver or gold) plate; even though at this point it is not sure whether the script was ever actually used in an early period.
3. sMar chen in HUMMEL (2000) in column 5 tends to align with sMar chen in ZZ Dictionary (column 3).
4. sMar chen in BEIJING (column 10) seems a more developed, perhaps a later or derived specimen or style.

TABLE III: sPUNGS CHEN AND sPUNGS CHUNG (VOWELS &amp; CONJUNCTS)

ROMAN	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	DBU CAN	DBU MED	JOSEP ALAY sPungs chen	JOSEP ALAY sPungs chung	LOKESH CHANDRA sPungs chen	LOKESH CHANDRA sPungs chung	CHAPHUR sPungs chen	SHERAB NYIMA sPungs chen	SHERAB NYIMA sPungs chung	BEIJING sPungs
DBU										
DANDA	॥									
A										
Ā?										
I										
U										
E										



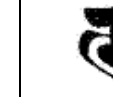



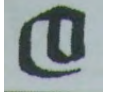

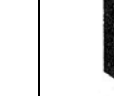
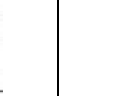





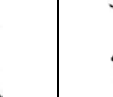



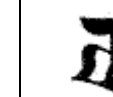




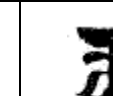






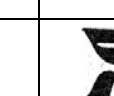

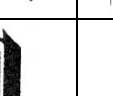


0	ॐ							ॐ	ॐ	
AU	ॐ									
CANDRA BINDU										
AUM	ॐ cf. ॐ				ॐ	ॐ	ॐ			
KI	ॐ		ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ			
KĪ										
KU	ॐ		ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ			
KE	ॐ		ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ			
KO	ॐ		ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ	ॐ			

KAM	𑀓𑀺		𑀓𑀺	𑀓𑀺	𑀓𑀺	𑀓𑀺				
KYA	𑀓𑀺𑀸		𑀓𑀺𑀸	𑀓𑀺𑀸	𑀓𑀺𑀸	𑀓𑀺𑀸		𑀓𑀺𑀸	𑀓𑀺𑀸	
KRA	𑀓𑀺𑀹		𑀓𑀺𑀹	𑀓𑀺𑀹	𑀓𑀺𑀹	𑀓𑀺𑀹		𑀓𑀺𑀹	𑀓𑀺𑀹	
KLA	𑀓𑀺𑀻		𑀓𑀺𑀻	𑀓𑀺𑀻	𑀓𑀺𑀻	𑀓𑀺𑀻	𑀓𑀺𑀻	𑀓𑀺𑀻	𑀓𑀺𑀻	
KVA	𑀓𑀺𑀼						𑀓𑀺𑀼	𑀓𑀺𑀼		
RKA	𑀓𑀺𑀽		𑀓𑀺𑀽	𑀓𑀺𑀽	𑀓𑀺𑀽		𑀓𑀺𑀽	𑀓𑀺𑀽	𑀓𑀺𑀽	
RKYA										
LKA	𑀓𑀺𑀾		𑀓𑀺𑀾	𑀓𑀺𑀾	𑀓𑀺𑀾		𑀓𑀺𑀾	𑀓𑀺𑀾	𑀓𑀺𑀾	
SKA	𑀓𑀺𑀿		𑀓𑀺𑀿	𑀓𑀺𑀿	𑀓𑀺𑀿		𑀓𑀺𑀿	𑀓𑀺𑀿	𑀓𑀺𑀿	

SKRA(U)	མཁྱེན་པ་ཀླུ་ཡུ་						མཁྱེན་པ་ཀླུ་ཡུ་			
SKYA	མཁྱེན་པ་ཀླུ་ཡུ་						མཁྱེན་པ་ཀླུ་ཡུ་			
SKRYO							མཁྱེན་པ་ཀླུ་ཡུ་			

TABLE III: sPUNGS CHEN AND sPUNGS CHUNG (CONSONANTS)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
ROMAN	DBU CAN	DBU MED	JOSEP ALAY sPungs chen	JOSEP ALAY sPungs chung	LOKESH CHANDRA sPungs chen	LOKESH CHANDRA sPungs chung	CHAPHUR sPungs chen	SHERAB NYIMA sPungs chen	SHERAB NYIMA sPungs chung	BEIJING sPungs
KA	ཀ་									
KHA	ཁ་									
GA	ག་									
NGA	ང་									
CA	ཅ་									
CHA	ཆ་									
JA	ཇ་									



NYA	ཏ་									
TA	ཏ་									
THA	ཐ་									
DA	ད་									
NA	ན་									
PA	པ་									
PHA	ཕ་									
BA	བ་									
MA	མ་									

TSA	ཅ་									
TSHA	ཅཱ་									
DZA	ཇ་									
WA	ཇཱ་									
ZHA	ཉ་									
ZA	ཉཱ་									
'A	འ་									
YA	ཡ་									
RA	ར་									

LA	ལ་									
SHA	ཤ་									
SA	ས་									
HA	ཧ་									
A	ཨ་									

## References

- JOSEP ALAY: *'Phrul gyi yi ge bzhi bcu rgyal bstan gsal ba'i sgron me*, written by Drung mu wer zhi (=g-Yung drung rgyal mtshan?) in Fire-Pig year (i.e. 1887AD). The manuscript is obtained by Josep Lluís Alay.
- LOKESH CHANDRA: *Indian Scripts in Tibet*. Reproduced by Lokesh Chandra from the Collection of Prof. Raghuvira, New Delhi, (1982) p. 59.
- CHAPHUR: *Yig gzugs du ma'i ma phyi gzhon nu mdzes pa'i lang tsho*, by Bya phur Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, pp.3ff., Dolanji: Bon Monastic Centre, (1994).
- \* CHAPHUR does not give the sPungs chung script.
- SHERAB NYIMA: *Yig rigs ma phyi mkhas dgu'i mdzes rgyan, Yig rigs brgya yi ma phyi 'dzam gling mkhas dgu'i mdzes rgyan phyogs las rnam rgyal*, by sNang rgyal A ti Shes rab nyi ma, pp. 268–74 (sPungs chen) & pp. 283–8 (sPungs chung), published by Bod gzhung shes rig las khungs, Delhi (2003).
- BEIJING (sPungs): *Bod kyi yig rnying zhib 'jug*, p.803, Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, Beijing (2003).

TABLE IV: BRU SHA (VOWELS)


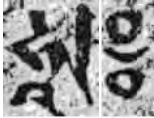




































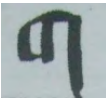















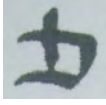













ROMAN	DBU CAN	DBU MED	JOSEP ALAY	LOKESH CHANDRA	CHAPHUR	SHERAB NYIMA	ASIA CENTRALE ET GILGIT MS.	GILGIT MS.
DBU								
KI							 མི་	 མི་
KU								 མུ་
KE							 མེ་	 མེ་
KO							 མོ་	



TABLE IV: BRU SHA (CONSONANTS)

ROMAN	DBU CAN	DBU MED	JOSEP ALAY	LOKESH CHANDRA	CHAPHUR	SHERAB NYIMA	ASIA CENTRALE ET GILGIT, MS.	GILGIT, MS.
KA	ཀ་							
KHA	ཁ་							
GA	ག་							
GHA								
NGA	ང་							
CA	ཅ་							
CHA	ཆ་							

JA	𑌕						𑌕	𑌕
NYA	𑌖							
TA	𑌗						𑌗	𑌗
THA	𑌘						𑌘	𑌘
DA	𑌙						𑌙	𑌙
DHA							𑌚	𑌚
NA	𑌛						𑌛	𑌛
PA	𑌜						𑌜	𑌜

PHA	ཕ་							
BA	བ་							
BHA								
MA	མ་							
TSA	ཅ་							
TSHA	ཅ་							
DZA	ཇ་							

WA	ཨ་							
ZHA	ཞ་							
ZA	ཟ་							
‘A	ཨ་							
YA	ཡ་							
RA	ར་							
LA	ལ་							



SHA	ཤ་							
SA	ས་							
HA	ཧ་							
A	ཨ་							
KYA	ཀྱ་							
KRA	ཀྲ་							

## References





- JOSEP ALAY: *Phrul gyi yi ge bzhi bcu rgyal bstan gsal ba'i sgron me*, written by Drung mu wer zhi (=g-Yung drung rgyal mtshan?) in Fire-Pig year (i.e. 1887AD); the manuscript is obtained by Josep Lluís Alay.
- LOKESH CHANDRA: *Indian Scripts in Tibet*, reproduced by Lokesh Chandra from the Collection of Prof. Raghuvira, p. 60, New Delhi, (1982).
- CHAPHUR: *Yig gzugs du ma'i ma phyi gzhon nu mdzes pa'i lang tsho*, by Bya phur Nam mkha' rgyal mtshan, p.23, Dolanji: Bon Monastic Centre, (1994).
- SHERAB NYIMA: *Yig rigs ma phyi mkhas dgu'i mdzes rgyan, Yig rigs brgya yi ma phyi 'dzam gling mkhas dgu'i mdzes rgyan phyogs las rnam rgyal*, by sNang rgyal A ti Shes rab nyi ma, p.332, published by Bod gzhung shes rig las khungs, Delhi (2003).
- RENOU, LOUIS ET FILLIOZAT, JEAN: *L'inde Classique, Paleographie*, appendix 1, pp.690–2, Hanoi: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, (1953).

1. *Gilgit manuscripts*, Nalinaksha Dutt; Vol.I , ed. by Nalinaksha Dutt, Srinagar: His Highness' Government, Jammu and Kashmir, (1939).
2. *Gilgit manuscripts*, Nalinaksha Dutt; Vol.II, part 1, Srinagar: His Highness' Government, Jammu and Kashmir, (1949–1954).
3. *Gilgit manuscripts*, Nalinaksha Dutt; Vol.II, part 2-3, Calcutta, (1950–1954).
4. *Gilgit manuscripts*, Nalinaksha Dutt; Vol.III, part 1-4, Srinagar: His Highness' Government, Jammu and Kashmir, (1942--1950).
5. *Gilgit manuscripts*, Nalinaksha Dutt; Vol.IV, Calcutta, 1959.

TABLE V: COMPARATIVE TABLE ZZ AND THE N-E GROUP OF INDIC SCRIPTS (VOWELS)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Roman	Brahmi Maurya (3rd c. BC) Ins.	Gupta 4th c. AD Ins.	Gupta 6th c. AD PL MS	dBu can	dBu med	Josep Alay sPungs chen	Josep Alay sPungs chung	Josep Alay Bru sha	Van Manen sMar chung	Lokesh Chandra sMar chen	Ranjana	Lantsa N-E	Vartu N-E	Bengali N-E	Maithili N-E	Oriya N-E
DBU																
DAṆḌA																
AUM																
A																
KĀ																
KI																
KĪ																
KU																

KŪ	 kū	 sū	 ū													
KṚ	-	 kr̥	 ṛ											-	-	
KṜ	-	-	 ṝ											-	-	
KḶ	-	-	 ḷ													
KḸ	-	-	 ḹ													
KE	 ke  ṭe	 ne	 e	गो												
KAI	 thai	 vai	 ai													
KO	 go  no	 go	 o	गो												
KAU	-		 au													
KAM	-		 am	गो												

KAḤ	-														
		ah												AḤ	

\* These letters are followed in Indian alphabetical system where as they are absent in Tibetan system.

\* These letters are followed in Tibetan alphabetical system where as they are absent in Indian system.

Column No. 1–3 show the illustration of early varieties of Indian alphabets.

Column No. 4–10 show Tibetan and few ZZ varieties.

Column No. 11–16 show the illustration of North-Eastern group of Indian alphabets.

## References

(Column 5) NAMKHAI NORBU, *dBu med*, pp.44f., Dharamsala 1984 (1981).

(Column 1–3) G. OJHA: *Indian Paleography*, Plate 16, 19 (revised and enlarged second edition from 1918), New Delhi (1993).

(Column 6–8) JOSEP ALAY: *'Phrul gyi yi ge bzhi bcu rgyal bstan gsal ba'i sgron me*, written by Drung mu wer zhi (=g-Yung drung rgyal mtshan?) in Fire-Pig year (i.e. 1887 AD). The manuscript is obtained by Josep Lluís Alay.

(Column 9) VAN MANEN: Collection of Bon texts in Johan van Manen Tibetan Collection. I.KERN 2740/B9.

(Column 10) LOKESH CHANDRA: *Indian Scripts in Tibet*. Reproduced by Lokesh Chandra from the Collection of Prof. Raghuvara, p.60, New Delhi (1982).

(Columns 11–12) , [www.lantsha-vartu.org](http://www.lantsha-vartu.org), (mainly for consonants)

(Column 12–13), Das, S.C.: “The Sacred and Ornamental Characters of Tibet”, *RASB*, Pt.1, No.2, (Plate 1–9), Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta (1888) (for vowels and conjuncts)

(Columns 14–16) OJHA: *Indian Paleography*, Plate 16, 78, 79 (revised and enlarged second edition from 1918), New Delhi (1993).

\* These *ṣa* and *śa* are taken from G. Ojha, *Indian Paleography*, Plate II, (Khalsi floor inscription, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC); *ṭha* is taken from Pl. II (Shivalika Pillar inscription, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Dehli)

Rest (Column 3) is taken from Ojha, Plate I, (Girnar Inscription by Maurya King Ashoka, 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC).

Zhu yi Rnal 'byor Nyi ma grags pa, *Sgra yi don sdeb snang gsal sgron me* (English title: Tibetan Zhang Zhung Dictionary), pp.1–22, Delhi (1965).



TABLE V: COMPARATIVE TABLE ZZ AND N-E GROUP OF INDIC SCRIPTS (CONSONANTS)


























Roman	1 Brahmi Maurya 3rd c. BC Ins.	2 Gupta 4th c. AD Ins.	3 Gupta 6th c. AD PL MS	4 dBu can	5 dBu med	6 Josep Alay sPungs chen	7 Josep Alay sPungs chung	8 Josep Alay Bru sha	9 Van Manen sMar chung	10 Lokesh Chandra sMar chen	11 Ranjana	12 Lantsa N-E	13 Vartu N-E	14 Bengali N-E	15 Maithili N-E	16 Oriya N-E
KA				का												
KHA				ख												
GA				ग												
GHA																
NA				न												
CA				च												
CHA				छ												
JA				ज												
JHA																

ÑA				ཏ་												
TA																
THA																
DA																
DHA																
NA																
TA				ཏ་												
THA				ཐ་												
DA				ད་												
DHA																

NA				ꠘ							ꠚ					
PA				ꠙ							ꠛ					
PHA				ꠚ							ꠜ					
BA				ꠛ							ꠝ					
BHA											ꠞ					
MA				ꠜ							ꠟ					
TSA				ꠟ												
TSHA				ꠠ												
DZA				ꠡ												
WA				ꠡ							ꠛ					



ZHA				ཞ་												
ZA				ཟ་												
'A				འ་												
YA				ཡ་												
RA				ར་												
LA				ལ་												
ŚA	 			ཤ་												
SA	 	 														

SA				𑀓												
HA				𑀔												
KSA																
INĀ																
A				𑀕												

These letters are followed in Indian alphabetical system where as they are absent in Tibetan system.

These letters are followed in Tibetan alphabetical system where as they are absent in Indian system.

Column No. 1–3 show the illustration of early varieties of Indian alphabets.

Column No. 4–10 show Tibetan and few ZZ varieties.

Column No. 11–16 show the illustration of North-Eastern group of Indian alphabets.

## References

(Column 5) NAMKHAI NORBU, *dBu med*, pp.44f., Dharamsala 1984 (1981).

(Column 1–3) G. OJHA: *Indian Paleography*, Plate 1, 2, 16, 17, 19 (revised and enlarged second edition from 1918), New Delhi (1993).

(Column 6–8) JOSEP ALAY: 'Phrul gyi yi ge bzhi bcu rgyal bstan gsal ba'i sgron me, written by Drung mu wer zhi (=g-Yung drung rgyal mtshan?) in Fire-Pig year (i.e. 1887 AD). The manuscript is obtained by Josep Lluís Alay.

(Column 9) VAN MANEN: Collection of Bon texts in Johan van Manen Tibetan Collection. I.KERN 2740/B9.

(Column 10) LOKESH CHANDRA: *Indian Scripts in Tibet*. Reproduced by Lokesh Chandra from the Collection of Prof. Raghuvara, p.60, New Delhi (1982).

(Columns 11–13), [www.lantscha-vartu.org](http://www.lantscha-vartu.org)

(Columns 14–16) OJHA: *Indian Paleography*, Plate 16, 78, 79 (revised and enlarged second edition from 1918), New Delhi (1993).

\* These *ṣa* and *śa* are taken from G. Ojha, *Indian Paleography*, Plate II, (Khalsi floor inscription, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC); *ṭha* is taken from Pl.II (Shivalika Pillar inscription, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Delhi).

Rest (Column 3) is taken from Ojha, Plate I, (Girnar Inscription by Maurya King Ashoka, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC).

Zhu yi Rnal 'byor Nyi ma grags pa, *Sgra yi don sdeb snang gsal sgron me* (English title: Tibetan Zhang Zhung Dictionary), pp.1–22, Delhi (1965).

TABLE V<sup>a</sup>: © Saraju Rath, *International Institute for Asian Studies* (see also Rath 2011, p.189 and 2012, p.53)

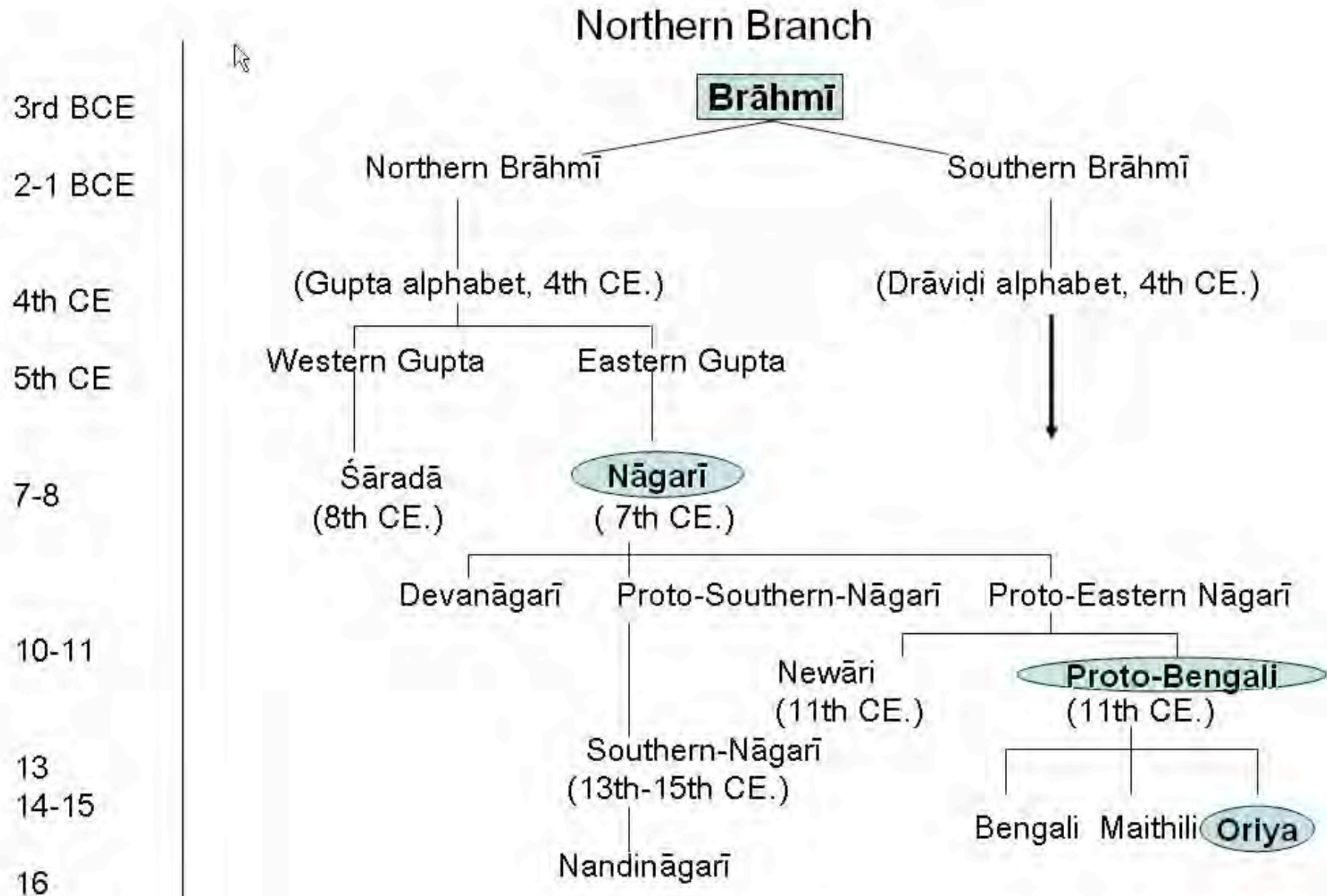


Table VI: TRANSLITERATION OF SMAR CHUNG TITLES BY KALSANG NORBU GURUNG, BASED ON EVERDING (2001), PP.133F.

## JS 1960

༥ ཁྱད་པར་བྱེ་བྲག་གིས་དབུས་ཕྱོགས་བཞུགས་སྟོ༥

༥	ཁྱད་	པར་	བྱེ་	བྲག་	གིས་	དབུས་	ཕྱོགས་	བཞུགས་	སྟོ༥
//	khyad	par	bye	brag	gis	dbus	phyogs	bzhugs	sho

## JS 2110

༥༥ ༥ ༥ གསང་སྒྲགས་ སྟོང་(སྟོང་)འཕྲང་ཟབ་པ་ཅིག་ཡོད་དོ་ཨ༥༥

༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥	༥༥
༥༥	༥༥	གསང་	སྒྲགས་	སྟོང་	འཕྲང་	ཟབ་	པ་	ཅིག་	ཡོད་	དོ་	ཨ་	༥༥	༥༥
??	//	gsang	sngags	sdzong	'phrang	zab	pa	cig	yod	do	a	//	??

## JS 2110 (C)

གསང་སྒྲགས་སྡོང་(སྡོང་)འཕྲང་སྡོགས་(སྡོགས་)ཤོ།

གསང་	སྒྲགས་	སྡོང་	འཕྲང་	སྡོགས་	ཤོ།	॥
གསང་	སྒྲགས་	སྡོང་	འཕྲང་	སྡོགས་	ཤོ་	॥
gsang	sngags	sdzong	phrang	sdzogs	sho	//

## JS 2110a

། ཐུགས་དགེས་པར་མཛོད།

།	ཐུགས་	དགེས་	པར་	མཛོད་	།
།	ཐུགས་	དགེས་	པར་	མཛོད་	॥
?	thugs	dgyes	par	mdzod	//

JS 2655 (looks more like *dbu med*)

། གཡུང་རྩུང་ཆེ་དབང་གི་རྒྱལ་པོ་འི་སྒྲགས་སྒྲུབ་།

།	གཡུང་	རྩུང་	ཆེ་	དབང་	གི་	རྒྱལ་	པོ་	འི་	སྒྲགས་	སྒྲུབ་	།
།	གཡུང་	རྩུང་	ཆེ་	དབང་	གི་	རྒྱལ་	པོ་	འི་	སྒྲགས་	སྒྲུབ་	॥
//	g-yung	drung	tshe	dbang	gi	rgyal	po	'i	sngags	sgrub	//



## JS 2656

ཨྲ ། མཁའ་འགོ་གསང་སྐྱོར་མ་རྩ་ཚང་པར་བཞུགས་ཤྱོ།

ཨྲ	།	མཁའ་	འགོ་	གསང་	སྐྱོར་	མ་	རྩ་	ཚང་	པར་	བཞུགས་	ཤྱོ།
ཨྲ	།	མཁའ་	འགོ་	གསང་	སྐྱོར་	མ་	རྩ་	ཚང་	པར་	བཞུགས་	ཤྱོ།
@@	//	mkha'	'gro	gsang	skor	ma	nu	tshang	par	bzhugs	sho //

## JS 2666

དབང་གི་ཕྱིན་ལས་བཞུགས་(ེ)

དབང་	གི་	ཕྱིན་	ལས་	བཞུགས་
dbang	gi	phrin	las	bzhugso

## JS 2667

ེ དབང་གི་ངོ་སྟོང་བཞུགས་(ེ)

ེ	དབང་	གི་	ངོ་	སྟོང་	བཞུགས་
%	dbang	gi	ngo	sprod	bzhugso

## JS 2670

༄ ཨ་ཨྱ་རྩྱུ་(རྩྱུ་)༄ མཁྱེན་སྟེ་(བཙེ་)སྟོབས་ཀྱིས་སེམས་ནིང་མངོན་དུ་སྟོན་ལ་ཕྱག་འཆལ་ལོ༄

༄	ཨ་	ཨྱ་	རྩྱུ་	༄	མཁྱེན་	སྟེ་	སྟོབས་	ཀྱིས་	སེམས་	ནིང་	མངོན་	དུ་
%	a	om	hum	%	mkhyen	stse	stobs	kyis	sems	nyid	mngon	du

སྟོན་	ལ་	ཕྱག་	འཆལ་	ལོ༄
ston	la	phyag	'tshal lo	%

## JS 2671

༄ སྐྱུ་བསུམ་རང་གསལ་སྟོན་ལ་ ཕྱག་འཆལ་ལོ༄

༄	སྐྱུ་	བསུམ་	རང་	གསལ་	སྟོན་	ལ་	ཕྱག་	འཆལ་ལོ༄	༄
%	sku	bsum	rang	gsal	sgron	la	phyag	'tshal lo/	%

## JS 2679

॥ བན་གདགས་ཡིག་ཅུང་ངོ་།

॥	བན	གདགས་	ཡིག་	ཅུང་	ངོ་	།
//	phan	gdags	yig	chung	ngo	/

## JS 2745

མཁའ་འགྲོའི་གསང་སྟོན་བཞུགས་སྟོ། ། །

མཁ	འགྲེ	འགྲོའི་	གསང་	སྟོན་	བཞུགས་	སྟོ།	།	།
%%	mkha'	'gro'i	gsang	spyod	bzhugs	sho	!	// !

## JS 2780

ཕུར་པའི་དོན་བཤད་བཞུགས་སྟོ། (༡)

ཕུ	ར་	པའི་	དོན་	བཤད་	བཞུགས་སྟོ།	།
?	phur	pa'i	don	bshad	bzhugs sho	/



## JS 2782

འོག་ཁུ་ཡུལ་དུ་བསྐྱགས་པའི་སྐོར་བཞུགས་སོ།

འོག་	ཁུ་	ཡུལ་	དུ་	བསྐྱགས་	པའི་	སྐོར་	བཞུགས་	སོ།	
'og	klu	yul	du	bsgrags	pa'i	skor	bzhugs	so	%

## JS 2793

༥ གཏན་ཆོགས་རིག་པའི་གལ་མདོ་བཞུགས་སྟོ།(༡)

༥	གཏན་	ཆོགས་	རིག་	པའི་	གལ་	མདོ་	བཞུགས་	སྟོ།	
༥	གཏན་	ཆོགས་	རིག་	པའི་	གལ་	མདོ་	བཞུགས་	སྟོ།	
?	gtan	tshigs	rig	pa'i	gal	mdo	bzhugs	sho	/

## JS 2825

སྙན་རྒྱུད་ཚོག་རྒྱུད་དབང་དང་བཅས་པ་ཁྱད་པར་སྙན་རྒྱུད་དབང་དང་བཅས་པ་ཡོད་དོ། མི་ཐེ།

སྙན་	རྒྱུད་	ཚོག་	རྒྱུད་	དབང་	དང་	བཅས་	པ་
snyan	rgyud	chog	drug	dbang	dang	bcas	pa%

ཁྱད་	པར་	སྙན་	རྒྱུད་	དབང་	དང་	བཅས་	པ་	ཡོད་	དོ།	མི་ཐེ།	
khyad	par	snyan	rgyud	dbang	dang	bcas	pa	yod	do%	i thi%	

## JS 2826

ཁ་གཙང་སྙན་པའི་སྙན་མེད་པ་

ཁ་	གཙང་	སྙན་	པའི་	སྙན་	མེད་	པ་	པ་
%	gab	sbas	ston	pa'i	sgron	ma	%

## JS 2858

༐ བྱམས་མ་ཆེན་མོ་བྱད་ཀྱི་འཇིགས་སྐྱབས་མ་ཡི་བསྐྱོག་པ་བཞུགས་པ་ལེགས༐

༐	བྱམས་	མ་	ཆེན་	མོ་	བྱད་	ཀྱི་	འཇིགས་	སྐྱབས་	མ་	ཡི་	བསྐྱོག་	པ་	བཞུགས་
%	byams	ma	chen	mo	byad	kyi	'jigs	skyobs	ma	yi	bzlog	pa	bzhugs

པ་	ལེགས༐	༐
pa	legso	%

# Knowing Zhang-zhung: The Very Idea<sup>1</sup>

Dan Martin

On those occasions when the subject of Zhang-zhung language has come up in conversation, as it tends to do from time to time in Tibet-related contexts, it almost invariably turns toward the question of whether or not Zhang-zhung is a dead language, or, as this may also be put, Does anybody *know* Zhang-zhung today? Of course in a sense, if anyone anywhere is making *any* use of a language, or attempts however feebly to learn and make use of it, it cannot be regarded as entirely dead. The question we will consider is the following related, yet quite different one: Is it possible for us today to know the Zhang-zhung language that existed in the centuries surrounding the seventh- or eighth-century fall of the western Tibetan kingdom of Zhang-zhung?<sup>2</sup> The attempt to answer this question will lead us to consider the early evidence of the language along with problems in manuscript transmission, lexical resources, Tibeto-Burman comparisons and take a look at the *Innermost Treasury of Existence* to illustrate, however briefly (and however focused on vocabulary, not morphology), the range of obstacles that rise up to confront us.<sup>3</sup> Despite the problems,

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<sup>1</sup> Although they are by no means the only ones who ought to be acknowledged, I would like to single out Christoph Cüppers (Lumbini), Nathan Hill (London), Tsering Thar (Beijing) and Christina Willis (Austin), with thanks for their generous help in obtaining information and research materials that have proven indispensable for this research. I should point out that this essay is about the language and does not concern itself with Zhang-zhung script. The speculations of Namkhai Norbu on Zhang-zhung language are particularly well known, but they have largely focused on the possibility that Tibetan script was formed on the basis of an older Zhang-zhung script (see most recently chapter four, entitled ‘The Written Language of Ancient Zhang Zhung,’ in Norbu 2009: 149-166), and have not dealt very much with the Zhang-zhung words themselves (one of the notable exceptions being his discussions about Zhang-zhung elements in the Tibetan Emperors’ names; see especially Norbu 1995: 22-25). Although the presence or absence of Zhang-zhung script is of little or no relevance in this essay, those who are interested are referred to the most recent discussions of Zhang-zhung script, by Schaik (2011: 65-67) and Blezer (in this volume).

<sup>2</sup> The exact date of this event is not of much consequence for the present considerations. Bon histories place it during the reign of Khri-srong-lde-brtsan, which means in the mid-to-late eighth century, although the text we know as the *Old Tibetan Annals* indicates that Zhang-zhung had already been subjected to Tibetan rule in 644 or 645 CE; see Dotson 2009: 82. For extensive discussion of this topic I refer the interested reader to Blezer 2010.

<sup>3</sup> We may say without much fear of contradiction that the text of the *Srid-pa'i Mdzod-phug*, or *Innermost Treasury of Existence* (for simplicity’s sake, it will be called the *Treasury* in this essay) was for the first time made available to the

I believe our knowledge quest may be undertaken with a certain degree of optimism. The question is only, How much?

A group of academic philologists at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem is at work on a critical text edition of the Hebrew Bible, according to a recent newspaper story.<sup>4</sup> They have been at work on it for five decades, which is to say half a century. At their present rate of progress, the story continues, their task will be completed in *only* another two hundred years. I should not be understood to imply that my small and individual effort to make a text edition of the Bon scripture known as the *Innermost Treasury of Existence*, or *Srid-pa'i Mdzod-phugs* ought to be compared to theirs. For one thing they are working with a full canon of sacred literature made up of a number of quite different texts. I have been working with only one scripture among the hundreds that make up the Bon collections. I started working on it in the mid-1990's, and over a period of a few years slowly but surely completed most of the work on it. Having the complete text with all its variants, in the form of a searchable computer file, I found to be an indispensable tool when writing a lengthy article published in 2000.<sup>5</sup> The edition is not finished yet. As long as new manuscripts keep appearing, as we may hope they will, it is possible it will never be done.

It became clear early on that an ordinary word-based text edition would not make sense, that it would be necessary to make an edition of variant lines. This is because in some places the syllables seem to behave like amoebas, dividing and recombining in interesting ways. What this means very simply is that not only word boundaries, but even syllable boundaries are not always clear, thus rendering the usual methods of marking textual variants unviable. Making a line-based edition is less awkward and inefficient than it might seem, given that the metrical scheme of this otherwise not-so poetic work adheres to brief lines of seven syllables throughout.

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world at large only with its New Delhi publication of 1966. As for Zhang-zhung morphology, hardly anything will be said in this paper about Zhang-zhung words. I believe there are reasonable prospects of progress on that front, and some efforts were made in the introduction to Martin 2010.

<sup>4</sup> This Associated Press story appeared in many newspapers and online publications, for most part under the title "In Jerusalem, Scholars Trace Bible's Evolution," on August 12, 2011 or thereabout.

<sup>5</sup> Martin 2000. The computer file of the text edition was circulated in 2000, and in January 2010 was posted on the internet for free download in searchable file formats (see the end of this essay, following the bibliography, under "Online Resources"). I hope that other researchers will make good use of it.

There are basically two reasons the *Treasury*, as I will call it from now on, deserves special attention. First of all, it is the most important cosmological text of Bon, in this way very much corresponding to the Abhidharma texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> It is a key text for understanding the more scientific aspects of Bon religion in areas of physics and the metaphysics of time and space, mental states analyses and so forth. A huge exegetical literature on it exists, demonstrating its enormous interest for Bon's traditional scholarship. Secondly, if we may be allowed to neglect temporarily a few relatively short *dhāraṇīs*, it is the only available text of a significant size that is largely bilingual, supplying for most part both Zhang-zhung and Tibetan languages. This promises to make it a veritable Rosetta Stone for the recovery of an evidently lost Tibeto-Burman language. In any case, since the *Treasury* was excavated in the year 1017 CE, it should be possible to count it among the very few Tibeto-Burman languages to be recorded in writing in early times — perhaps not the oldest, but certainly among the oldest.<sup>7</sup>

I would like to say a few words on this topic of relative age since, anyway, this question of whether anyone is “knowing Zhangzhung” involves knowing what it is that we are talking about knowing, which would of necessity include those spatio-temporal coordinates that fall under the categories of provenance and dating. To make one thing perfectly clear at the beginning, I am of the belief — perhaps because my interest in Zhang-zhung is also bound up with my interest in the excavator of the *Treasury*, Gshen-chen Klu-dga'<sup>8</sup> — that the *Treasury* is quite old. For myself, Zhang-zhung above all means the Zhang-zhung of the *Treasury*, and I tend to believe that its Zhang-zhung language is the standard against which all other evidence needs to be measured in order to assess its Zhang-zhung-ity.

No doubt some readers will object and say, What about those medical texts from Dunhuang that were called Zhang-zhung by F.W. Thomas? Aren't they older than the

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<sup>6</sup> For an attempt at comparing the actual textual and intellectual contents of the *Treasury* with the two principal Abhidharma texts of Mahāyāna Buddhism, see Martin 2000.

<sup>7</sup> A brief survey of the early written evidence for Tibeto-Burman was supplied in the introduction (at pp. 6-7) to Martin 2010, which might be regarded as complementary to the present essay, and to some degree overlaps with it, although the earlier work was somewhat more technical in tone.

<sup>8</sup> Gshen-chen Klu-dga' was the main subject of my doctoral research. See Martin 2001 for the published version of the 1991 dissertation.

*Treasury*? Shouldn't they be regarded as the gold standard for identifying *true* Zhang-zhung?

I would answer in the negative. The Dunhuang texts were found hidden in a walled chamber in the year 1900.<sup>9</sup> This chamber was probably walled up in more-or-less the same time (even perhaps a slightly later time) as Gshen-chen Klu-dga's 1017 CE discoveries in southern Tibet. The *Treasury*, according to the broader Bon traditions, has claims to being *much* older than the Dunhuang text, since they believe it was concealed in the time of the Tibetan Emperor Dri-gum-btsan-po, who may be difficult to date, but let us say, as some guess, around the third or fifth century of the Common Era. The *Treasury* was, according to its own colophon, set down from the words of Lord Shenrab at a place on the borders between Zhang-zhung and Tibet by two illustrious figures in Bon history, one of them being Stong-rgyung Mthu-chen.<sup>10</sup> The latter was, according to the best-known chronological work of Bon, born in a year corresponding to 976 BCE. Of course we may want to argue that the date is improbable or impossible. The same author places the birth of Śākyamuni Buddha only 16 years later, in 960, and the first Tibetan emperor's birth even earlier, in 1136 BCE.<sup>11</sup> I suppose the first date would need to be moved forward by about four centuries, and the second date by about a millennium. Most people would not find this early dating of Stong-rgyung Mthu-chen very convincing and it is probably impossible to verify by the usual methods. My point is just that Bon traditions tend to claim *very* early origins for the *Treasury*, and these claims may seem (to many of us at least) to be begging for criticism and

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<sup>9</sup> For the latest word on the subject of the manuscripts, their place of concealment and their dispersal, see especially chapter two of Schaik & Galambos (2012: 13-34).

<sup>10</sup> I hope to do a more careful study of the colophons and historical narratives relevant to them in another place. The two persons involved in the production of the text are from Zhang-zhung and Tibet, and the implication is clear that the one from Zhang-zhung was responsible for the Zhang-zhung, while the one from Tibet was responsible for the Tibetan. Most people probably expect to learn from the colophon that it was translated from one language into the other. However, there is no mention of an act of translation here, and as far as we know from what it says, both language versions could have been produced at the same time. That may seem a small point, but not so since it could help explain why of the versions in the two languages, it is the Zhang-zhung that is less complete. The scenario for the original inscription of the *Treasury* has been described in a footnote in Bellezza 1997: 287. See also the more recent comments in Bellezza 2008: 179, which suggest Stong-rgyung may be depicted in a rock art portrait that he dates to the "early historic period (?)."

<sup>11</sup> This chronological work, written by the Sman-ri Monastery's abbot Nyi-ma-bstan-'dzin in 1842, gives the date of death of Dri-gum-btsan-po as 680 BCE (Kvaerne 1971: 227 no. 47). The dates for the birth of Stong-rgyung-mthu-chen (226 no. 36), the birth of Śākyamuni (226 no. 38), and the first Tibetan emperor Gnya'-khri-btsad-po (225 no. 33) are also found there. There are alternative systems of Bon chronology, but I will not allow them to distract us for the time being.

reassessment. But still, we could make a strong case that since the *Treasury* was uncovered at about the same time the medical texts were concealed, the Bon text would have at least equal claims for antiquity, and this is the important point for the time being. We could even say that it has claims for greater antiquity, but then the medical texts make no claims of antiquity for themselves — in fact they hold hardly any claims on antiquity at all apart from their being found at Dunhuang. Their scribing has been dated — rather broadly, on paleographical grounds — to the late eighth or early ninth centuries.<sup>12</sup>

Of course, we could turn this around and make the following very different argument: It appears certain that we have the medical texts today in the form in which they existed a thousand years ago, while the *Treasury* has spent nearly one thousand years since its excavation circulating *above* ground, undergoing scribal recopying and consequent transformations. This is true, and it is something I will go on to emphasize. I also think we have to remember that this is a distinct issue from the question of which is older.

To my mind, the most important argument against the Dunhuang medical documents has nothing to do with their age relative to the *Treasury*. It is that they are not Zhang-zhung. Let me clarify this a little. Firstly, these texts never say they are in Zhang-zhung. To the contrary, they are silent about the identity of their own language. It was F.W. Thomas who decided to call them Zhang-zhung. Early on, some very prominent scholars objected to his applying the name *Zhang-zhung* to them. Let me quote for you David Snellgrove's objection published in his review of a book by Giuseppe Tucci in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental & African Studies* issued in 1959:

"I would only question whether written documents in the language of Zhang-zhung have in fact been found in Central Asia (p. 107). This was just an idea of F.W. Thomas, which to my knowledge has not yet been substantiated. He gave no valid reason for naming as Zhang-zhung the fragments of some early Tibetan dialect, which he edited in *JRAS*, 1933, 405-10. He has also named Zhang-zhung yet another MS (Stein MS fragment no. 43) of the India Office Library."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See Takeuchi, Nagano & Ueda (2001: 47-48) for the discussion.

<sup>13</sup> Snellgrove 1959: 377.



What David Snellgrove said over fifty years ago has yet to be disproven, and still today the identity of the language of these texts has not been determined. So, to bring this particular argument to a conclusion, we have a long tradition of Bon testimony that the name Zhang-zhung belongs to the language that is found in some of their scriptures, and above all the *Treasury*. In the case of the Dunhuang texts we would have to rely on an idea of Thomas, who died in 1956, nine years before the main evidence for Zhang-zhung would become available.<sup>14</sup> I would hazard to guess that if he had seen that evidence, he would have changed his mind. I strongly recommend that we in any case stop labeling these medical texts “Zhang-zhung” and choose a name that accurately reflects what we do know about them. I think that means we would have to speak of them as texts written in an as-yet unidentified Tibeto-Burman language that still largely resist our best efforts at decipherment.<sup>15</sup>

In order to briefly encapsulate the history of early modern academic studies of Zhang-zhung, I like to use a mnemonic device I call “The Three H’s and the One S.” To put them in chronological order of their main contributions, they are Helmut Hoffmann (1940, 1967, 1972), Erik Haarh (1968), Rolf Stein (1971), and Siegbert Hummel (1974+).<sup>16</sup> First in the list, Hoffmann published already in 1940 his summary of knowledge about the languages of Bon, including Zhang-zhung, in which he also doubted Thomas’s identification of the language of his Dunhuang texts as Zhang-zhung.<sup>17</sup> This German-language article, “On the Literature of the Bonpo,” provides a nice summary of earlier bits of scholarship not only by Thomas, but also by Berthold Laufer, A.H. Francke and others who would need to be included in a more detailed historical survey.

In many ways, the mid-1960’s were a golden age for Zhang-zhung language study in the world at large. In 1965, the Zhu glossary, which glosses Zhang-zhung

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<sup>14</sup> The dates of F.W. Thomas were 1867-1956 according to Bacot 1956. Much of Thomas’ relevant research was published posthumously (Thomas 1967 & 2011), and I haven’t been able to absorb very much of the rich content of the 2011 book, although it makes a great deal of use of vocabulary items belonging to west Himalayan languages. It was published without an index, which makes it more difficult to use.

<sup>15</sup> See Takeuchi, Nagano & Ueda (2001), Takeuchi (2002) and Takeuchi & Nishida (2009).

<sup>16</sup> Hummel published several works (1974+, 1986, 1995) culminating in his 2000 book on the subject. The book includes the same three articles translated into English in the order of their publication, with three added articles that are not so much devoted to the *language* of Zhang-zhung.

<sup>17</sup> Hoffmann 1940: 183.

words and phrases with Tibetan translations, was published in New Delhi. In a 1967 article Hoffmann declared his intention to come out with a dictionary of Zhang-zhung that would have been based primarily on the Zhu glossary. However, in 1968, Erik Haarh had published his alphabetized and transcribed version of Zhu's glossary with his own added English translations of the Tibetan.<sup>18</sup>

While Zhang-zhung dictionaries were being made, only a year after the appearance of the Zhu glossary, Venerable Tenzin Namdak published something I regard as even more important for the task of knowing Zhang-zhung. I mean the 1966 publication of the *Treasury* itself. Since by far the greater part of the Zhu glossary is drawn from the pages of the *Treasury*, the wisest course would seem to be to do as Zhu, working sometime between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, did and gain knowledge of the language directly from this single most important piece of bilingual literature.<sup>19</sup> If this sounds too easy, it may be so. In fact, the initial obstacles — that may well include obstacles due to one's own level of preparedness — as well as the more enduring problems with following this advice and going directly to the *Treasury* are manifold, so now a few words about some of those problems.

The first and main problem is one that I think is impossible to emphasize strongly enough. Those who do not know how to read Tibetan cursive (*dbu-med*) letters will never make much if any sense of the Zhang-zhung evidence, even when the text in hand is in block letters (*dbu-can*). A second related problem: if I may ask you to imagine yourself as one of the scribes who did not know the language you were copying, there would be no way you could possibly resolve ambiguities in your readings of the individual letters (as you would surely do if it were a familiar language). Scribes under these conditions are likely to write the letters they think they see, rather than whole words that they understand.

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<sup>18</sup> The Zhu glossary is of uncertain date, since the author is not very securely identified. It ought to date, in any case, to sometime in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. For a discussion, see Martin 2010: 10 no. 18. Siegbert Hummel also made note of the recent appearance of the Zhu glossary in a publication that appeared two years later (Hummel 1968).

<sup>19</sup> Hoffmann 1972, made use of not only the *Treasury*, but even more interestingly, a few texts from the *Byams-ma* cycle that still haven't received nearly the attention they deserve in terms of their potential value for Zhang-zhung studies. This same article goes on to correct some of the mistakes of Haarh 1968, but in the process adduces quite a bit of evidence fitting the Zhang-zhung vocabulary within a range of Tibeto-Burman cognates.

Here as an example is a single line from the *Treasury*, chapter 6, on the biological world (*bcud*), a line that we might translate, ‘While abiding in the light of the form realm’:

rko khu khir zhi nam lu ci /	gzugs khams 'od la gnas pa'i tshe /
[S: rko lung khir zhi nam lu ci /]	
[K: rko phung khir zhi nam lu ci /]	

This shows not only the ambiguities in reading letters that look similar in cursive (in this case the letters *kh*, *l* and *ph*),<sup>20</sup> it also demonstrates a point for which I could give thousands of examples, which is that the letter *nga* in syllable-final position may or may not belong there; it is very difficult to be sure. The reason for this is simply that in *cursive script* the syllable-ending punctuation called the *tsheg* looks so close to the letter *nga* that it has, over time, resulted in this confusion. Zhang-zhung syllables that end in a vowel would tend to pick up the final *-ng*. The Zhang-zhung word for ‘water’ occurs as both *ti* and *ting*, just to give a more frequently encountered example.<sup>21</sup>

Another example, based on a single occurrence of a word meaning ‘anchor,’ is found in the *Treasury*, in its chapter eight, the chapter on the minute-to-expanded [emotional] poisons.<sup>22</sup> Here the Zhang-zhung word *thung-yung* corresponds to Tibetan *gting-rdo*. The Tibetan word, literally ‘depth stone,’ usually means ‘anchor,’ or depending on context perhaps also a ‘weighting stone’ for a fishing net or a ‘plumb line’ used in building planning and construction. The Zhang-zhung occurs with textual variants *thur yung*, *thung ung* & *phur thur*.<sup>23</sup>

While the *proto-Tibeto-Burman* word for ‘stone’ has been reconstructed as *lung*, the Kinnauri word is *ung*.<sup>24</sup> Byangsi language has *wung* or *ung*, ‘rock.’ Darma *7ong*,

<sup>20</sup> In this case we can make use of evidence internal to the *Treasury* itself to conclude that the spelling *rko phung* is the one most attested, and therefore is most likely to be the correct reading.

<sup>21</sup> I believe the *ti* spelling is more authentic, but I will not try to demonstrate it here. I will leave this task to the real comparative linguists of Tibeto-Burman. Matisoff 2001: 157 appears to be unaware of this problem with the final *-ng* in Zhang-zhung word for ‘water,’ even though it doesn’t fit with any of his comparative evidence.

<sup>22</sup> In Tibetan, *phra-rgyas dug*. On this Abhidharma concept, see Martin 2000: 30-32, where the provisional translation ‘infiltrators’ is employed. The Sanskrit is *anuśaya*, the Zhang-zhung, *ti-pra-lgyam*.

<sup>23</sup> The word doesn’t seem to be found at all with any kind of spelling in Blo-gros-rab-gsal 2010 and Pasar 2008.

<sup>24</sup> The references to the sources of these words are not supplied here, since they were given already in the relevant entries in Martin 2010: 108, 201.

‘rock.’ This same Darma word has been transcribed (using Devanagari script) as *om* — in Chaudangsi language, the identical word *on*. It may not be unnecessary to point out that this word is for practical purposes identical in all these languages.<sup>25</sup> While the ordinary Tibetan word for ‘stone’ is *rdo*, we should also point out that the special Tibetan word for ‘boulder,’ *pha-bong*, might need to be brought into the equations, also.<sup>26</sup>

One point in giving this example is to show that, given the Kinnauri, Darma and Byangsi words for ‘rock,’ one is inclined to go with the specific variant *ung* for the Zhang-zhung word rather than the spelling *yung*. In other cases as well, comparative material could help us make otherwise difficult decisions. While some may regard this as an unacceptable procedure, it seems that given our situation, we cannot afford to refuse help from any promising source. So long as we are honest about what we are doing, I see no problem in it.

From here on it is the Darma language that will be the main subject for our attention. In recent years I have been telling everyone I think might be interested why it is I think Darma is most significant for Zhang-zhung studies. At the same time, I ought to make clear that I do not claim to be the first to recognize their connectedness.<sup>27</sup> I think there is, or ought to be, general consensus that among modern languages Zhang-zhung bears the closest resemblance with a cluster of languages in or near to the valley of Kinnaur, on the one side, as well as a group of languages of Uttarakhand on the other.

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<sup>25</sup> In this case the words look different because of different transcription practices. The syllables *om* and *on* represent the same sounds, bearing in mind that, after all, these are *spoken* and not generally *written* languages. The languages of the Rüng Müng have never possessed anything that could be called a standardized writing system, even if the matter has been discussed in recent decades.

<sup>26</sup> Although this may not be entirely accurate, I think the concepts in these languages closely correspond to specific and distinct meanings of the English words ‘stone’ (throwable object, using one hand only), ‘rock’ (larger, but still possible for a single person to lift or roll), and ‘boulder’ (large [semi-]detached version of the same, too large to be moved by a single person). The Tibetan word for ‘rock’ is *brag*, while the Zhang-zhung word is *zur*. Note the entry for ‘stone’ in Nishi & Nagano 2001: 23.

<sup>27</sup> As far as published sources are concerned, Hoffmann 1972 is most pertinent, but the then-unpublished work of F.W. Thomas (2011) that we mentioned in an early note, especially its Chapter Four, represents an impressive effort. I have made use of it neither here nor, for more obvious reasons, in Martin 2010. Thomas made many specific references to Darma vocabulary, or as he calls it, “Därmiyā.”

“The West Himalayish or Kanauri subgroup comprises a number of languages of northwestern India. Included (from west to east) are Chamba Lahuli, Patani or Manchati, Tinan or Ranglo, Bunan or Gahri, Kanauri or Kinnaurik, Kanshi, Rangkhass, Darmiya, and Chaudangsi/Byangsi... Zhangzhung is now generally agreed to fit here.”<sup>28</sup>

Those last-mentioned languages, those of the more easternly side, include speakers of not only Darma, but the quite closely related dialects/languages known as Chaudangsi and Byangsi. The speakers of all three languages are known as the Rang People, or as they say: Rŭng Mŭng.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most common beliefs the Rŭng Mŭng have about their own origins is that they descend from Rajput princes who escaped to the mountains during the Mughal conquest of India. They know a great deal about Tibetan culture, share a certain number of cultural practices, such as the churning of butter tea, with Tibetans — in the pre-1950 era they engaged in a lot of trade with Tibet — but they themselves do not think they bear much if any relationship with them. Even while a certain number of Tibetan words have entered into their vocabulary, the greatest bulk of their vocabulary is now of Indo-European — mostly supplied *via* Hindi and Nepali — origin. At the same time, much of the core vocabulary is clearly identical or extremely close to Zhang-zhung. These most obviously shared words include words for body parts both internal and external, directions, colors, and numbers. They share words for boy, girl, and horse. In the following listing, a slightly revised version of a list already published,<sup>30</sup> I supply the Literary Tibetan words for the sake of contrast.

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<sup>28</sup> Bradley 2002: 80. Darmiya is just another derivative way of saying Darma, although I believe the form Darma has greater local authenticity. George van Driem (2003: 312-314) has criticized some of Bradley’s language classifications used in his paper in a review, but as best I can tell these criticisms have no effect on this particular passage.

<sup>29</sup> One way of understanding the name might take it to mean ‘People of the Valley,’ with reference to a Tibetan word for ‘valley, gorge,’ which is *rong*. However, given that Byangsi *rung* means “a mound, a hillock, a peak” (Boharā 2008: 98), and given that Zhang-zhung *r[w]ang* means ‘mountain,’ I believe it is better interpreted to mean ‘Mountain People.’ On the other hand, *Rong*, as a local ethnonym used in Sikkim for Lepchas, probably really does mean ‘Valley [Inhabitants].’ In Tibet, *Rong-skad* or ‘Valley Language’ is used to designate the language spoken by farmers, differentiating it from the language of nomads called *Brog-skad*.

<sup>30</sup> Martin 2010: 18-19. This list by no means exhausts the evidence. We might want to add the Zhang-zhung word *rkur* (also spelled *skur* and *kur*), which may well correspond in sound with Darma *gwar*, as it certainly does in meaning: ‘forest.’ Zhang-zhung *rko-rwang*, defined by the Tibetan word *snod*, ‘vessel,’ may correspond to Darma *gur’ang*, ‘body’ (see Hoffmann 1972: 197). Zhang-zhung *khu-phang* means ‘fog,’ while Darma *khu* means ‘smoke.’ Zhang-zhung *lang-rko*, ‘spleen,’ corresponds to Darma (as well as Byangsi and Chaudangsi) *lom-khom* (pronounced

DARMA	ENGLISH	ZHANGZHUNG (TIBETAN)
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Relational:

<i>ba</i>	father	<i>ba</i> (Tib. <i>pha</i> ).
<i>shiri</i>	boy	<i>hri-tsa</i> (Tib. <i>bu, phru gu</i> ).
<i>shya</i>	king	<i>rkyā</i> (Tib. <i>rje</i> , ‘lord’).
<i>tsame</i>	daughter, girl	<i>tsa-med</i> (Tib. <i>bu-mo</i> ).

Internal bodily:

<i>ching-cha</i>	liver	<i>shin</i> (Tib. <i>mchin-pa</i> ).
<i>khagaco</i>	stomach	<i>khog-tse</i> (Tib. <i>gro-d-pa</i> ). <sup>31</sup>
<i>hrup</i>	rib	<i>hrib</i> (Tib. <i>rtsib</i> ).

External bodily:

<i>be</i>	skin	<i>pad</i> (Tib. <i>lpags</i> ). <sup>32</sup>
<i>gunda-la</i>	finger (middle)	<i>kan</i> (Tib. <i>kan-ma, gung-mo?</i> ).
<i>reju</i>	nose	<i>ra-tse</i> (Tib. <i>rna-ba</i> ), noting Chaudangsi <i>ratse</i> & Byangsi <i>hrace</i> , both meaning ‘ear.’
<i>tshum</i>	hair	<i>con</i> or <i>tson</i> (Tib. <i>skra</i> ).

Colors:

<i>mang-nu</i>	red	<i>mang</i> (Tib. <i>dmar-po</i> ). <sup>33</sup>
<i>shi-no</i>	white	<i>shi-nom</i> (Tib. <i>dkar-po</i> ). <sup>34</sup>

*long-khong*), ‘spleen.’ These along with still more examples may be found in Martin 2010, with the exact sources given in the respective entries.

<sup>31</sup> The Zhang-zhung word does not seem to appear in the *Treasury*. Here we may also have to take the Tibetan word *khog-pa* into account, although it is more likely to be used to refer to the abdominal cavity or interiority in general, rather than the stomach specifically. Early Tibetan *kog-rtse* (with variant spellings), meaning ‘trap,’ may also be relevant.

<sup>32</sup> Consulting the STEDT (see Online Resources, below), I find that Bunan *bwat* and Kanaur *bod*, both with the meaning of ‘skin,’ may be even closer to the Zhang-zhung than is the Darma. It rather depends on how we believe the Zhang-zhung word *pad* was pronounced. (My questionable assumption is that every letter of a Zhang-zhung syllable was pronounced, and with invariable values very probably identical with the corresponding Tibetan root letters.)

<sup>33</sup> In Darma the *-nu* is an adjective-forming suffix (functioning rather like the Tibetan suffix *-po*), which may therefore be disregarded for the sake of comparison.

<sup>34</sup> In the Zhang-zhung, *shi* and *shim* are both possible spellings.

Numbers:

<i>nisu</i>	seven	<i>snis</i> (Tib. <i>bdun</i> ).
<i>pi</i>	four	<i>bi</i> or <i>bing</i> (Tib. <i>bzhi</i> ).
<i>ra</i> [or <i>se</i> ]	hundred	<i>ra</i> (Tib. <i>brgya</i> ).
<i>tako-go</i>	first	<i>ti-ga</i> (Tib. <i>dang-po</i> ).

Other:

<i>hrang</i>	horse	<i>hrang</i> (Tib. <i>rta</i> ).
<i>hre</i>	field	<i>rig</i> or <i>tig</i> (Tib. <i>zhing</i> ). <sup>35</sup>
<i>je, tsema</i>	barley	<i>zag</i> or <i>zad</i> ['zay'?] (Tib. <i>nas</i> ). <sup>36</sup>
<i>phu</i>	copper	<i>phu</i> (Tib. <i>zangs</i> ).
<i>re-nani</i>	west	<i>ra</i> (Tib. <i>nub</i> ).
<i>sak</i>	breath	<i>sag</i> or <i>seg</i> (Tib. <i>dbugs</i> ).
<i>ti</i>	water	<i>ti</i> (Tib. <i>chu</i> ), but note that <i>ti</i> for 'water' is rather commonly found in Tibeto-Burman languages.

In short, the shared vocabulary occurs exactly in those areas that are most often considered to be core vocabularies of any language, suggesting that the two languages are closely related and may share lines of descent. I will leave it to the real comparative linguists to hammer out the details, but I believe this much I can say with reasonable certainty.

The correspondences between modern Darma and the thousand-year-old or more language of the *Treasury* are quite impressive. But I think the same could be said about all the other 'western Himalayan' (or West Himalayish) branch languages of

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<sup>35</sup> It ought to be observed here that the comparative material makes us inclined to accept the reading of *rig* over *tig* (they are capable of being confused in cursive script). However, Blo-gros-rab-gsal (2010: 132) has a listing for *tig* meaning 'field' (*zhing-kha*), and no entry for *rig* with this meaning. This is an improvement over the Pasar (2008: 85), which has neither *rig* nor *tig* with the meaning of 'field.' See the entry for *rig* in Martin 2010: 207, noting that Bunan language has a word for 'field,' *rig*, that is identical to the Zhang-zhung. The passages containing this word in the *Treasury* may require more thought. It is possible, or even likely, that the word for 'field' is in fact represented in the Zhang-zhung passage by the bi-syllabic *rig-tig* (Haarh 1968: 32 reads it as *tig-tig*), rather than just *rig*. But here it is possible, too, that the *tig* in the second syllable is only an indefinite article, which would again mean that the Zhang-zhung word for 'field' is simply *rig*.

<sup>36</sup> Boharā 2008: 55 has Byangsi *jai*, pronounced 'dze' meaning 'barley.' *Zad*, rather than *zag*, is more likely to be the correct Zhang-zhung form, since it occurs in more contexts, including some where it may stand for more general classes of 'seed' and 'grain.'

Kinnaur and Kumaon.<sup>37</sup> The one thing that makes Darma special above and beyond the others is that it is a language that was known by *the same name it is known today* in the twelfth century to the writer of the *Preface* to the *Secret Mother Tantra* commentaries.<sup>38</sup> I had written about this particular passage on Zhang-zhung language in my master's thesis of 1986 (revised and published in 1994). It wasn't until 2005 while I was standing in the open stacks of the Kern Institute Library of Leiden University, leafing through a chapter in George van Driem's weighty two-volume book *Languages of the Himalayas*<sup>39</sup> that I came to know that my earlier footnote was not even on the right track. I now believe the name Dar-ma of the twelfth-century text and the name of the modern language Darma are to be identified with each other because, well, they are in some large and significant sense *the same*, and not just in name.

Here is the passage from the preface to the *Meditation Commentary* to the *Secret Bon Mother Tantras* in the 1994 published version of the master's thesis.

zhang zhung las kyang skad rigs 'thun pa du ma yod pa las / 'di ni zhang zhung smar  
gyis sgra ste / 'chun [~gcun, 'jun] che brjod bde sgra ngag tshig gsal ba'o // des na  
gzhan dar ma'i sgra dang / dar ba'i sgra dang / dar ma dir gyis sgra dang / gu ge'i sgra  
dang / phal po che'i glang gi sgra dang / ldem ma yin no //

“Within Zhangzhung are several similar types of languages (or dialects), and among them what we have here [in the title of the *Mother Tantra* text] is the speech of Zhangzhung Smar, a very refined language, easily pronounced, with clear grammar, vocabulary and expressions. Apart from Smar we have the speech of Dar-ma, the speech of Dar-ba, the speech of Dar-ma-dir, the speech of Gu-ge, and the speech of the Common Cattle and Ldem-ma” [explanation of the Zhangzhung title of the *Mother Tantra* text follows].<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> This may now be tested with ease by consulting the STEDT database, listed among the Online Resources at the end of this essay.

<sup>38</sup> The confirmation of the existence of Darma language at such an early date would appear to challenge the idea that the ancestors of the Darma people emigrated to their present location in the time of the Mughal conquest, although I am not ready to commit myself to any scenario for the ethnogenesis of the Rüng Müng. For the master's thesis mentioned presently, see Martin 1994, page 16 in particular (and see the passage quoted herein).

<sup>39</sup> Driem 2001: 934-957. Meanwhile, the Kern Institute Library has unfortunately been closed.

<sup>40</sup> Here I've translated freshly a passage also translated in Martin 1994: 15-16, although there is no very significant difference in meaning. For the footnote in which I made an attempt to explain Dar-ma along with the other language names used here, see p. 16, note 49.



I will not review every point, just to say that in the footnote that was attached to the word Dar-ma in this passage, I was only ‘thinking aloud’ musing over various possibilities. But now I think the identity between the twelfth-century text’s Dar-ma and modern Darma language of Kumaon, given that both may be identified as Zhang-zhung, or as a *type* of Zhang-zhung, is by far the more likely explanation. And to further this argument, the Dar-ma of the twelfth-century Bon text is also known in a passage repeated twice (with variant spellings) in Dunhuang texts, where the expression is Zhang-zhung Dar-ma, meaning that a place named Dar-ma was considered to form a part of the territory of Zhang-zhung.<sup>41</sup> So I believe that having come full circle, I’ve arrived at a seemingly odd conclusion. We might summarize this conclusion in the following way: A large part of what is necessary to “know Zhang-zhung” of early western Tibet is developing the ability to read through the textual evidence that lies before our eyes. And one very important way of resolving the ambiguities presented by the variant readings is to see what the words are in closely related or even, I would now say, Zhang-zhung-ic languages nowadays mostly located in a belt stretching beneath the belly of the Himalayan range between Chamba and Kumaon. These words are relevant because in some sense and degree they *are* Zhang-zhung, whatever else they may be.

In view of the sad present-day state of the Zhang-zhung of the *Treasury*, I’d like to end on a note of optimism, as I promised earlier in this essay. One important development is that the Darma language will soon be better documented, largely through the efforts of a recent Ph.D. from Texas named Christina Willis. Her dissertation on Darma grammar has been made freely available over the internet, and she intends to write a dictionary of Darma in the future.<sup>42</sup> I think this will prove indispensable for Zhang-zhung studies.

There was yet another exciting development recently when I received a copy of the early eighteenth-century Rab-brtan woodblock print of the *Treasury* thanks to the efforts and generosity of Tsering Thar. I haven’t yet finished incorporating all its variant readings into the text edition. It is certainly helpful to have this further textual

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<sup>41</sup> These two passages may be located with ease by searching at the website of OTDO (see Online Resources, below), specifically the texts with the numbers Pt 1290 (“Zhang-zhung Dar-ma”) and Pt 1286 (“Zhang-zhung Dar-pa”). In both contexts, it’s the site of the ruler Lig-snya-shur.

<sup>42</sup> Willis 2007.

evidence. Still, I am hoping for manuscripts older than the ones that have turned up so far, which are all eighteenth-century or later as best I can tell. Just one manuscript that would date a few centuries earlier could make all the difference for assisting our knowledge of Zhang-zhung. I think “Knowing Zhang-zhung” is something we can look forward to in the future, after a great deal more work has been done on the *Treasury*, its manuscripts, and its many commentaries; and we should not neglect to add, more work on the languages of western Tibetan and its surrounding areas in general, but especially in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh. In short, although no one *really* knows it yet, there is hope, justifiable hope, that we will come to know Zhang-zhung better.

## Appendix:

What are the reference works most useful for Zhang-zhung vocabulary research? If learning the meanings of Zhang-zhung words is your concern, I most recommend two recent dictionaries. One of them is my own (Martin 2010), which I immodestly regard as an essential tool if for no other reason than that it laboriously covers or indexes nearly all of the past glossaries and modern academic studies of Zhang-zhung vocabulary. Of course it will in any case be useful and sometimes necessary to have a way of consulting those earlier works directly. This dictionary was initially conceived as a tool for attempting to understand the *Treasury*.<sup>43</sup>

In some ways a bigger and better dictionary is the one by Dagkar Geshé Namgyal Nyima. It covers Zhang-zhung terms drawn from an amazingly large number of Bon texts. The bibliography lists about 460 texts that were used as his sources.

Dagkar Namgyal Nyima (2003) *Zhang-zhung — Tibetan — English Contextual Dictionary*. Bonn: Selbstverlag. 498 pages.

If neither of these answers your purpose, there are two more very useful works that have been made available in recent years. Both of these are lexicons that include both Zhang-zhung and Tibetan words. The first is a 2008 publication from the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka:

Pasar Tsultrim Tenzin, Changru Tritsuk Namdak Nyima & Gatsa Lodroe Rabsal, A *Lexicon of Zhangzhung and Bonpo Terms*, ed. by Yasuhiko Nagano and Samten G. Karmay, with English translations by Heather Stoddard, Senri Ethnological Reports no. 76. Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology.<sup>44</sup>

Most recently, there is the dictionary of Geshé Lodrö Rabsel (b. 1971), who was himself one of the authors of the earlier lexicon:

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<sup>43</sup> The earliest version of this digitized dictionary to be released to a larger public was that of April 1997, on the Ligmincha website, about 40 pages in length. It was since then taken down. I understand it may still be possible to locate it in some corner of the internet, although I would no longer recommend it.

<sup>44</sup> This book has been reviewed by Helmut Eimer (2010), with some interesting comments.

Dge-bshes Blo-gros-rab-gsal (2010) *Gna'-bo'i Zhang Bod Tshig-mdzod* ['Dictionary of Ancient Zhang-zhung and Tibetan'] Lanzhou: Kan-su'u Mi-rigs Dpe-skrunkhang.

And finally, I must include here two recent lexicons of the languages of the Rŭng Mŭng that I obtained with the kind help of Christoph Cüppers of the Lumbini International Research Institute in Nepal. These are found in the bibliography under Bangyāl 2007 and Boharā 2008.

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# The Unhappy Bride and Her Lament

Brandon Dotson

It is often claimed that certain texts or genres emerged from oral traditions.<sup>1</sup> This assertion is particularly prominent in relation to written epic, as in the case of hypotheses concerning the textualization of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* under the Athenian tyrant Hipparchus in the 6th century B.C.E (cf. e.g. Jensen 2000: 65–66). Oral origins are often posited for historical, liturgical, and a host of other genre of written texts. Drawing on such putative Merkmale as formulae, text-internal references to performative traditions, analogies with living traditions, and so on, one can imaginatively reconstruct the oral traditions that gave rise to textual artefacts like divination manuals, funerary and healing liturgies, or epic. This sort of imaginative exercise is not pointless or without its merits. However, the origins and oral transmissions of written traditions can never be definitively proved, and they remain only hypothetical, if fascinating scenarios. Another method, which draws on a growing body of recent research into oral traditions and in particular into the textualization of oral traditions, is to focus instead on various scenes and motifs as traditional modes of expression that constitute, simply put, a register in which traditional meanings are conveyed. Generally considered to be the result of the interaction of textuality and orality, these scenes and motifs are individual coefficients of meaning that often allude to a larger tradition on which performers, writers, editors, and compilers may draw. In what follows I will illustrate how such principles are at work in the earliest extant Tibetan historical narrative, the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, and in early Tibetan ritual texts by focusing on the episode of Sad mar kar.

The sister of Srong brtsan sgam po (d. 649) and wife of the Zhang zhung king Lig myi rhya, Sad mar kar is remembered as playing a pivotal role in the conquest of Zhang zhung in the mid-640s when her coded instructions, in symbol and in song, exhorted

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<sup>1</sup> I take this opportunity to acknowledge the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation and the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, who sponsor the “Kingship and Religion in Tibet” research group based at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, under whose auspices this research was conducted. I am grateful to Lewis Doney, George FitzHerbert, Janet Gyatso, and Nathan Hill for comments to an earlier draft of this paper.

her brother to invade her husband's kingdom. She is accordingly presented as an instrumental figure in the conquest of Zhang chung, and is a forerunner or even a model for another treacherous out-of-favor junior queen, Lady Gu rub Snang gron legs mo, whose betrayal is the reason for Zhang chung's (re)conquest by Khri Srong lde brtsan (742–c.800) in the narrative of the *Bon ma nub pa'i gtan tshigs* (Blezer 2010: 32–33).<sup>2</sup> I shall approach the episode of Sad mar kar as a 'matrimonial narrative trope' drawn from Tibetan narrative traditions that also inform ritual liturgies and divination texts. In doing so, I shall illustrate how this narrative form encodes traditional meanings that might otherwise be lost outside the context of the original imagined audience. I shall also briefly reflect on this 'imagined audience,' and its relevance to the *Old Tibetan Chronicle's* expression of a 'national' consciousness.

### Orality, Literacy, and Traditionality in Tibet

Before introducing the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* and describing what I mean by the 'matrimonial narrative trope,' it may be helpful to restate the obvious about orality and literacy in Tibet. In doing so, I also supply theoretical grounding for my own approach. 'The obvious,' as I see it, is that there has been and continues to be an extended interaction between the oral and the written in traditional Tibetan modes of knowledge production and transmission. Traditional monastic education emphasizes memorization and recitation, and the oral transmission of religious traditions.<sup>3</sup> Textual transmission is often accompanied by an oral "reading empowerment" (*lung*), and the most prized transmissions are often exclusively aural. Some texts are composed for chanting or for oral/aural consumption, and scholastic writing is infused by the oral modes of knowledge transmission that inform it. Written compositions such as *nam thar* – referred to variously as hagiography, (auto)biography, or, perhaps less problematically, life writing – are sometimes performed orally, with all the variations based on narrator and audience that such retelling customarily entails.<sup>4</sup> Outside of the

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<sup>2</sup> In the *Legs bshad mdzod* this junior queen is known as Snang bza' Sgron legs; see Karmay (1972: 86–87). For a discussion of the narratives of the two conquests of Zhang chung and their permutations, see Blezer (2010). Blezer points out the similarity between Sad mar kar and Gu rub za: their husbands favor other wives over them, they assist the Tibetan conquest of Zhang chung, and they supply coded information to the Tibetan emperor. Gu rub za, it should be pointed out, is not imbricated within a "matrimonial narrative trope," on which see below.

<sup>3</sup> See Dreyfus (2003), Cabezón (1994), Klein (1994). Among other notable works that consider the relationship between the oral and the written in Tibet, see also Aziz (1985), FitzHerbert (2009), and van Schaik (2007: 186–91).

<sup>4</sup> Gyatso (1998: 282, note 17) records a fascinating synthesis of life writing and inspired bardic composition in which Tulku Riglo, who believed himself to be a reincarnation of Jigme Lingpa, improvised oral tellings "from memory" of

monastery, we find textualized oratory and oratorical texts in both the bardic tradition of Gesar and the performance of *mollas*, which are narratives foundational to a given community.<sup>5</sup>

These examples of intercourse between oral and written productions problematize any perceived opposition between oral and written modes of expression and lead us to question the relevance of these categories. In fact, there has been over the past few decades a trend away from attempting to identify features of written texts as “oral,” and accompanying proposals for alternative, less problematic categories. Wulf Oesterreicher, for example, prefers the language of immediacy and distance, and writes that “[p]henomena of orality in poetic or literary texts...do not reflect spontaneous or natural language but functionalize select features of linguistic immediacy” (Oesterreicher 1997: 206). Lauri Honko describes majority of epics (i.e., *Mahābhārata*, *Iliad*, *Beowulf*, *Gesar*) not as oral, but as “tradition-oriented,” by which he means that epic registers have been internalized by performers, scribes, and editors, who have moulded, if not created, these epics (Honko 2000: 7). “Linguistic immediacy,” “epic registers,” and traditional registers are not solely the province of singers and performers. A traditional register, along with its storylines and motifs, constitutes a “pool of tradition” on which writers, editors, and compilers may also draw. Honko describes a “pool of tradition” as follows:

We cannot postulate a well-arranged library of earlier performed oral texts in the mind of the individual but rather a ‘pool’ of generic rules, storylines, mental images of epic events, linguistically preprocessed descriptions of repeatable scenes, sets of established terms and attributes, phrases and formulas, which every performer may utilize in an imaginative way, vary and reorganize according to the needs and potentials present at a new performance. (Honko 2000: 18)

Fluency in such a register is what one might call traditional literacy, and John Miles Foley describes its characteristic mode of expression as “traditional referentiality,” his

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the latter’s autobiography, *Dancing Moon in the Water* (*Chu zla’i gar mkhan*), at Rdo Grub chen Monastery in the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>5</sup> For an account of how the illiterate bard Bsam grub gave a telling that reproduced almost verbatim an episode in a blockprint of the Gesar epic that was then in circulation, see FitzHerbert (2009: 179–82). On *mollas*, see Aziz (1985) and Jackson (1984: 84–86). Of course there are countless other such oral traditions in the Tibetan cultural area, such as the *lo rgyus* from Brag g.yab in Khams documented by Peter Schwieger; see Schwieger (2002).

favored term for the recurrence of scenes, motifs, and patterns which are “idiomatic signals” or “*sema*” (Foley 2010: 111). These signals encode meanings that are familiar to a traditional(ly literate) audience, and often allusively reference larger traditions known to the audience. For Foley, traditional referentiality works “like a language, only moreso,” in that a traditional register encodes units of meaning that “resonate with substantial ‘extra’ associations” (Foley 1999: 44). Understanding traditional referentiality, or becoming traditionally literate, we read a traditional text on its own terms and in its own idiom rather than imposing on it our own lexicon and thereby overlooking or misconstruing its contents. Foley illustrates how this is done through his ‘*apparatus fabulosus*,’ which glosses the “*sema*” in a section of book 23 of the *Odyssey* (Foley 1999: 241–62). From a philological perspective, one might say that this is simply good philology. On the other hand, these observations about traditionality have emerged from work on oral traditions, that is, from work that once emphasized the oral more than the traditional. After introducing the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, I approach the matrimonial narrative trope as an element drawn from an early Tibetan pool of tradition that also embraced ritual texts and divination documents, and I point out exactly how its traditional referentiality enriches our understanding of the Sad mar kar episode in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*.

### The Old Tibetan Chronicle and its Songs

The *Old Tibetan Chronicle* is the earliest extant Tibetan narrative history of the Tibetan Empire (c. 600—c.850 C.E.). It was probably edited and compiled shortly after the fall of the empire in the mid-ninth century, though this dating is disputed. What is not disputed, however, is that its contents focus on events spanning the seventh century up until the mid-eighth century. From a bird’s eye view, the *Chronicle* is made up of three main elements: genealogies, eulogies, and narratives with song. As for genealogies, there is one of emperors and one of chief councillors. The latter is anecdotal, and contains vignettes of the councillors’ characters and careers. The royal genealogy resembles more a list in which the emperors are linked as father to son, and where mothers are mentioned for the first three emperors and then, after a hiatus of several generations, for the more recent emperors. Eulogies recount the deeds of Tibetan emperors in a formulaic manner (e.g., conquering in the four directions while promoting law and order and good customs domestically) that is also found in royal

pillar inscriptions from the late-eighth and early ninth centuries. It is around the eulogies that the compilers and editors of the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* organized its contents into a chronological format following the reigns of the emperors (Uray 1992). The narratives with songs constitute the core of the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*. Three main narrative events are spotlighted, each with different protagonists:

1) the conquest of Ngas po and its aftermath in the early-to-mid-7th century (Pelliot tibétain 1287,<sup>6</sup> ll. 118–327; Bacot *et al.* 1940–1946: 132–49);

2) the conquest of Zhang zhung in the mid-7th century (Pelliot tibétain 1287, ll. 398–455; Bacot *et al.* 1940–1946: 155–61); and

3) the conflict between Khri 'Dus srong and the Mgar clan at the end of the 7th century (Pelliot tibétain 1287, ll. 456–536 and ll. 328–337; Bacot *et al.* 1940–1946: 161–70; 149–50)

There is also an episode concerning the alliance between Tibet and 'Jang (pre-Nanzhao Kingdom) during the reign of Khri Lde gtsug brtsan (704–c.754), but this consists of little more than a song, albeit an important one for understanding the possible use of these songs in court life. The tale of Dri gum btsan po, an aetiological myth of Tibetan kingship, fits somewhat uneasily into the category of narratives with song, as its songs are short and composed in a different meter to the six-syllable form used throughout the *Chronicle*.

The heroic songs of the *Chronicle* are what most set it apart from other contemporary Tibetan historical or quasi-historical works. They occupy an important place as some of the earliest extant examples of Tibetan poetry or song.<sup>7</sup> There are songs of conquest, proud songs sung in competition, chiding songs, and laments. The singers are emperors, councillors, generals, and princesses. The *Chronicle* uses two clear terms for the songs: *klu/glu* and *mgur*. A third term, *mchid*, means speech, and is used in a context where someone is inspired to “take to speech,” in what is often clearly song.

<sup>6</sup> Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts are cited according to their shelfmarks. Those marked “Pelliot tibétain” are held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris. “IOL Tib” abbreviates “India Office Library, Tibetan,” and these documents are housed in the British Library in London. The combination of letter and number following “IOL Tib” constitutes the full shelfmark.

<sup>7</sup> The most complete study of the songs remains Don grub rgyal (1997), where they are each translated into modern Tibetan. Uray (1972) is also a superb study, with a detailed discussion of the poetics of the songs and their use of homophones and double entendres.

In later tradition, the term *glu* indicates song in general, and *mgur* is a term used for songs of realization in a religious context, such as the famous *Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* (Jackson 1996: 372–74). There is a similar distinction in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, where *mgur* are sung by royalty, and *mchid* and *klu/glu* are sung by non-royals. Previous typologies of the *Chronicle*'s songs have tended to overlook the fact that the term *mgur* is used only for those songs sung by royals, and they have tended to draw a distinction between *glu* and *mchid* by characterizing the latter as “songs of provocation and dispute” (Ellingson 1979: 68–69). The term *mchid blangs pa* means, “to take to speech,” and the noun *mchid* is commonly used for speech and communication. Its semantic range obviously includes song, however, and the themes of the *Chronicle*'s *glu* and *mchid blangs pa* overlap such that both embrace praise on the one hand and chastisement on the other. The only singers of *mgur* in the *Chronicle* are Sha khyi/ Emperor Spu de gung rgyal, Emperor Khri Srong brtsan, Princess Sad mar kar, Emperor Khri 'Dus srong, and Emperor Khri Lde gtsug brtsan. The honorific/non-honorific distinction between *mgur* on the one hand and *glu* and *mchid blangs pa* on the other is evident in the songs exchanged between Khri Srong brtsan and Councillor Dbas Dbyi tshab prior to their reciprocal oaths of loyalty, and those exchanged between this same ruler and his chief councillor Mgar Stong rtsan at a banquet celebrating their victory over Zhang zhung. In the earlier episode, Khri Srong brtsan and Dbas Dbyi tshab exchange songs as a prelude to the reciprocal oaths that this emperor and his councillors swear with this councillor and his kinsmen. The emperor's song is a *mgur*, and the councillor's song is a *mchid blangs pa*. In the later setting of the victory banquet, the emperor sings a *mgur* that incorporates almost all of the verses of his earlier song with Dbas Dbyi tshab, and then Mgar Stong rtsan replies with his own song, referred to as a *klu*. Dbas Dbyi tshab's *mchid blang pa* and Mgar Stong rtsan's *glu* both express the ideals of mutual loyalty between ruler and subject, and this thematic unity partly explains their use of the same verse:

The lord — when he gives an order,  
 Always – an eternal realm.  
     The bird, when it shelters in its wings,  
     The chicks – they are radiantly warm.



rje 'Is ni bka' stsal na  
 gzha' ma ni yun kyi srid /  
 / bya 'Is ni zhu pub na  
 la pyi ni gdangs su dro (Pelliot tibétain 1287, l. 272; and – with minor  
 differences – ll. 440–41)<sup>8</sup>

The presence of such overlapping verses, along with the songs' recurrent imagery, prompted Géza Uray to refer to the *Chronicle's* songs as a "song cycle" (Uray 1972). The above metaphor of the bird and her chicks, along with those of the tiger, the yak, the horse and rider, and the arrow, is found in other of the *Chronicle's* songs. This creates a cross-referentiality in the imagery of the songs in which motifs can be repeated and developed, or where the original reference point of an image or metaphor may also be playfully inverted. Similar, and even longer verbatim repetitions are common in epic, as when Agamemnon repeats parts of his speech of *Iliad* 2.110–41 at 9.17–28. For some, like John Brockington in his analysis of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, such

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<sup>8</sup> These paired couplets have posed difficulties for translators and commentators. Bacot translates, "Quand le roi ordonne,/ Ce n'est que le temps de l'arc-en-ciel./ Quand c'est l'oiseau qui demande,/ [Le glacier] La pyi finirait par fondre"; Bacot *et al.* 1940–1946: 145. Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang translates, "Tsenpo, your precise command/ We will ever implement./ Like the bird spreading the arc of its wings,/ The sun in warm on the roost across the pass"; Drikung 2011: 194. Fortunately, we have the benefit not only of finding the verses twice in the *Chronicle*, with one helpful variation, but we also have recourse to the same verse in a dice divination text where the language is somewhat clearer. Looking first at text-internal parallels, the only important difference is that in the verse's appearance at ll. 440–41, *gzha' ma* is replaced with *gzha' pyl*. Btsan lha (1997: 779) glosses the latter with "small" or "I" (*phran dang nga rang*), Gnya' gong (1995, 371, n. 6) glosses *gzha' ma* with *gsha' ma*, meaning "righteousness," and Don grub rgyal (1997 [1984]: 592, n. 104) suggests that it may be a term for "subjects" (*'bangs*). None of these readings seem likely. A similar phrase is found in the divination text IOL Tib J 739, 8r1: *gzha phyir ni 'gum myi srid*. The term *gzha* or *gzha'* is often followed by the words "long" (*ring*; Pelliot tibétain 1134, ll. 7, 10; IOL Tib J 731, recto l. 131) and "length" (*ring thung*; Pelliot tibétain 1042, l. 137; Pelliot tibétain 1134, ll. 31, 151, 228). The term *gzha* / *gzha'* would seem to mean "duration," and by extension "always." It may be related to the term *zha* / *zhar* found often in oaths, e.g., *nam nam zha zhar* ("always and forever"). On the other hand, one also finds it paired with *gsang* ("secret"), so it is likely that this contextual translation of *gzha* / *gzha'* with "duration" and "always" does not capture its full semantic range, and it should be taken as provisional. The second couplet poses greater problems. Don grub rgyal (1997 [1984]: 593–93, nn. 105, 106) states that *zhu* is the figure of a bird extending its wings in a dome shape, and that a *la pyi* might be a baby bird, and translates the couplet as giving an image of a bird keeping its chicks warm under its wings (Ibid: 386). Huang and Ma (2000: 223, n. 20) agree that *la pyi* is a baby bird. In the parallel couplet in the dice divination text IOL Tib J 740, as we shall see below, the language is clearer: "when the bird shelters [them] in its breast, the chicks (*lan phyl*) are always warm" (*bya'ls khab sgob na lan phyl gtandu droste*; IOL Tib J 740, l. 25). The parallel with *khab sgob* Here *sgob* is a form of the verb *sgab* "to cover," or "spread over"; Hill (2010: 63; cf. *'gebs* on p. 49). In the same fashion as *khebs* "a cover" derives from *'gebs* "to cover," I take *khab* to be a noun derived from the verb *sgab*, meaning a place of shelter, and here indicating the downy warmth under the mother bird's wings. The image fits fairly well with Don grub rgyal's interpretation of *zhu pub*. The reading of *la pyi* / *lan phyi* is admittedly contextual; one could assume that by *pyi* one should understand *byi'u* / *bye'u*.

repetitions, along with other forms of parallelism, are indices of orality (2000: 201). Others, such as Oesterreicher, Honko, and Foley, would counter that such features as formulae, repetition, parallelism, and deixis are not necessarily hallmarks of orality or even imitations of oral forms, but simply reflect a particular, traditional register of expression.

The poetic and formal features of the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*'s songs certainly trade on parallelism. The above verse, for example, consists of parallel couplets. In the scroll itself the songs are not marked out by different pagesetting, but we can also discern triplets and longer 'stanzas.' Lines within a stanza are linked through a poetics of repetition. The most common is epistrophe, (the repetition of words or syllables at the end of the line), which should not be confused with rhyme. Other common features are anaphora (the repetition of words or syllables at the beginning of the line), and anastrophe (starting a line with the word or phrase that ended the preceding line). All of these features may be found in later Tibetan traditions of poetry and song, and have been well documented in the case of the Gesar epic.<sup>9</sup>

The songs also employ parallelism at a basic structural level in that a 'line' is comprised of two feet or hemistichs of three syllables each. The defining feature within the line is the normative use of the isolation particle *ni* – essentially a topicalizer – as the third syllable at the end of the first foot. This term is often left untranslated, or translated variously with "oh," "yes," "as for," or simply with the dash "-." These formal restrictions mark the songs off as a heightened register of speech that complements their conservative use of traditional images and formulae.

This type of six-syllable meter is not unique to the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*. Among other places, we find six-syllable verse in some of the prognoses in Old Tibetan dice divination texts. When a prognosis comes from the mouth a deity, often the words of the god or goddess will be rendered in this meter, though this is not always the case across the many dice divination texts from Dunhuang.<sup>10</sup> This oracular prognosis will sometimes be followed by a prose explanation that specifies whether it is good or bad regarding health, travel, friendship, fortune, enemies, hunting, and so forth, and what one should do to avert the dangers of a bad prognosis. Here is an example of a dice divination prognosis in six-syllable meter, arrived at through a roll of a 3 – 2 – 2 combination of three 4-sided dice :

<sup>9</sup> For a good example of anastrophe in Gesar, which Yang Enhong sees as an aid to memorization, see Yang (2001: 311).

<sup>10</sup> This meter renders the speech of gods, for example, in the Old Tibetan divination texts Pelliot tibétain 1051, Pelliot tibétain 1052, IOL Tib J 738, IOL Tib J 739, and no doubt others.

Oh! From the mouth of the snow-mountain god (*gangs lha*):

“Upon the soft, peaceful grasslands,  
An antelope calf, at the grasslands’ edge;  
[It is] the sacred possession of the *mu sman* goddess.  
It roams the meadows and grasslands;  
It is joyful, and hunters make no shouts.”

This prognosis is the prognosis of Lha shing pad mo. If you’ve cast it for household fortune or life-force fortune, the sacred gods support and protect you. If you’ve cast it for enemy fortune, there shall be no enemy. If you’ve cast it for livelihood fortune, livelihood will be provided. If you’ve cast it for a specific matter, it shall be accomplished. This prognosis is good for whatsoever you have cast it.

@@@ / @@ / @@ /

kye gangs lha nI zhal na re /

/ spang snar nI g.yel gong na /

/ gtsos bu nI snar mtha’ ya

mu sman nI gnyan gyI dkor /

/ ne’u sIng nI spang la yan /

/ dgyes te nI kus ma gdab /

/ mo ’dI nI lha shIng pad mo’i mo la bab ste / / khyIm phyas dang srog phyas la  
btab na lha dpal ’che ste ’go / / dgra phyas la btab na / dgra myed srId phyas la  
btab na srId phyin / / don gnyer na grub / / ’dron po la btab na ’ong / / mo  
’di ci la btab kyang bzang / /; IOL Tib J 738, ll. 1v82–85.

The use of this poetic form of trisyllabic hemistichs to render the speech of gods is suggestive when considering the register of the *Chronicle*’s songs. The singers, writers, editors, and/or compilers of the *Chronicle* dramatized the songs of heroes, traitors, emperors, and princesses with a form that was also – in some cases, at least – appropriate to the speech of gods. Following Oesterreicher, Honko, and others, we might see this not necessarily as evidence that both divination prognoses and the songs of the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* have a direct oral heritage, but rather as an indication that this form of expression in six-syllable meter constituted a register for heightened or marked speech. Foley also makes the point that such a traditional register “acts as a

selective brake on linguistic change within its domain” (1999: 75). This includes both archaisms and “analogical adaptations or extensions based on archaisms” (1999: 75). This is certainly relevant to the ‘archaic’ language of the *Chronicle* as found, for example, in its songs and oaths. The observation further problematizes any attempt at textual stratigraphy that might try to separate bona fide archaisms from stylized or retrospective archaisms. As for the form, without giving precedence either to divination or chronicle epic in terms of the direction of influence or borrowing, we might also observe that the use of this meter in the *Chronicle* could be a self-consciously archaizing form, that is, a register that was chosen as appropriate for rendering the songs of the heroes of yore.

### The *Old Tibetan Chronicle*’s Pool of Tradition and the Matrimonial Narrative Trope

Returning to Lauri Honko’s concept of the pool of tradition, we can observe that the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*’s pool is a very wide one that accommodates not only Tibetan royal edicts and divination manuals, but also Indian epic, Chinese narratives, and Tibetan ritual narratives. In the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*’s telling of the myth of Dri gum btsan po, for example, the myth’s hero, Ngar la skyes, is introduced as the infant sole survivor of a massacre, who will grow up to avenge this, or at least to restore balance. Besides the fact that this is a recurring motif in Indian literature, and one also found in the Gesar epic,<sup>11</sup> Ngar la skyes’ words to his mother are almost exactly the same as those of another would-be avenger in the Old Tibetan adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

#### *Old Tibetan Chronicle:*

The Rhya clan kill all of the Bkrag clan save for one pregnant woman, who flees to her natal land. Her small son, Ngar la skyes, asks of his mother, “If every man in every case has a lord, where is my lord? If every man in every case has a father, where is my father?” He implored her: ‘Tell me!’” (*myI gang bya gang la rjo bo yod na nga ’i rjo bo gar re / myi gang bya gang la / pha yod na nga ’i pha ga re zhes zer to / nga la ston chig ces;*

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<sup>11</sup> It relates, for example, to Gur dkar’s young son by Drug mo, whose destiny to defeat Gesar is thwarted when Gesar’s protective deities kill the boy (David-Neel & Yongden 1987 [1931]: 204).

Pelliot tibétain 1287, ll. 28–29; Bacot *et al.* 1940–1946: 125). He then recovers the deceased emperor’s corpse and helps to restore his heir to the throne.

Old Tibetan *Rāmāyaṇa*:

The god Vaiśravaṇa kills Yagśakore and all the demons, sparing only Yagśakore’s son, Malhyapanta, who survives in a sack. When he grows up, he thinks, “All neighbors in the land have parents and relatives. Where are my parents and relatives?” (*yul myl khyim tse thams cad la // pha ma dang gnyen bzhes yod na // bdag gyl pha ma dang / gnyen gdun* (Read ’dun) *ga re snyam nas*; Pelliot tibétain 981, ll. 23–24; de Jong 1989: 6). He then vows to take revenge on the gods.

There are other instances in which the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* has drawn on Indian epic, and the myth of Dri gum btsan po and the *Rāmāyaṇa* have enjoyed a close relationship over the centuries such that later iterations of each tradition bear witness to reciprocal influence.<sup>12</sup>

The appropriation of Chinese historical narrative in the fourth chapter of the *Chronicle* is achieved on a far greater scale than the use of Indian epic motifs in the tale of Dri gum btsan po. Here an episode, originally from the *Shiji*, is adapted for the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* such that characters and places from Warring-States China are replaced with those of mid-seventh-century Tibet (Takeuchi 1985). The dialogue remains largely faithful to the original Chinese, but the setting and some of the dynamics are considerably altered. It is thus not a wholesale borrowing but more of an appropriation or repurposing.

There are numerous examples of cases where the language found in the *Chronicle* is similar to or nearly identical with that found in divination texts and ritual texts. I shall confine myself to one example before moving on to an exposition of the matrimonial narrative trope. The paired couplets treated above, which were sung by

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<sup>12</sup> On how the story of a sole survivor of a battle or genocide participates in an Indian motif of royalty that informs Tibetan mythologies of the origins of the Tibetan kings, see Karmay (1998: 303–05) and Dotson (2011: 90). Besides the motif of the person enclosed in a cask and cast into the waters, which is nearly as ubiquitous as that of the predestined child avenger (cf. Kapstein 2003: 784, note 106 and Dotson 2011: 90), one could also point to the apparent allusion to “breaking the thigh” at Chr. i, which Zeisler (2011a: 188–89) argues is a reference to Bhima’s act of unprincipled revenge against Duryodhana. In later versions of the Dri gum myth, the motif of Ru las skyes’ birth (a moving vapor of blood is placed in a horn and given milk until it grows into the child hero, for example, in the *Mkhas pa’i dga’ ston* version) echoes the similarly miraculous birth of the Kauravas from a huge blob, divided into 100 pieces, and hatched in individual pots. The *Rāmāyaṇa* has likewise had a strong influence on the Tibetan Gesar epic, on which see Stein (1959: 522–23; 526–27; 575–77).

both Dba's Dbyi tshab and Mgar Stong rtsan, are found with some modifications in a dice divination prognosis. In the songs, they appear as follows:

The lord — when he gives an order,  
 Always — an eternal realm.  
     The bird, when it shelters in its wings,  
     The chicks — they are radiantly warm.

rje 'Is ni bka' stsal na  
 gzha' ma ni yun kyī srid /  
     / bya 'Is ni zhu pub na  
     la pyi ni gdangs su dro (Pelliot tibétain 1287, l. 272; and — with minor  
     differences — ll. 440–41)

In the divination text IOL Tib J 740/1, we find the following prognosis — the result of a 4 — 3 — 4 dice roll — come from the mouth of the mountain god Thang l[h]a ya bzbur:

[When] the god gives an order,  
 Listen always and ever!  
     When the bird shelters [them] in her breast,  
     The chicks are always warm.

lhas bka' stsal pa  
 gzha ma yundu nyondu nyon cīg /  
     bya'Is khab sgob na  
     lan phyī gtandu droste (IOL Tib J 740, ll. 24–25)<sup>13</sup>

Aside from the fact that this prognosis does not use the six-syllable meter, there is only one key difference: it is the god, and not the emperor, who makes the order. Here the relationship between god and man is depicted in the same way as that between lord and subject, a very fertile analogy that is found throughout Tibetan literature.

This is a very brief introduction, in broad brushstrokes, to the *Old Tibetan Chronicle's* pool of tradition. One could easily focus on any given image or trope and analyze it in greater detail.<sup>14</sup> Here I shall spotlight the matrimonial narrative trope and

<sup>13</sup> For comments, see above, footnote 8.

<sup>14</sup> To cite one example, I give a full treatment of the hunting trope, also found in the Sad mar kar episode, in Dotson (2013).

consider its expression both in ritual narratives and in the Sad mar kar episode of the *Chronicle*. The matrimonial narrative trope is most clearly expressed in ritual liturgies, where it presages the misfortune and/or death of one of the story's protagonists. Like the hunting trope, it appears as a formulaic preliminary to the ritual action that will follow, namely, the invitation of ritual specialists, the procurement of all of the necessary implements for the rite, and/or the successful diagnosis and performance of the healing rite or funeral. A typical storyline would be as follows. King X and Queen Y have a daughter, Z, who they wish to marry off. After considering a variable number of unsuccessful suitors, they marry her to King V, to whose land Z goes. Z is unhappy there, and calamity, illness, or death ensue. This can happen in any number of ways. For example, Z can poison her father, she can kill herself, or her husband can go hunting and be killed by demonic forces. There are other options. The key point is that the marriage inexorably leads into an illness or death which then requires the intervention of *gshen* or *bon* priests – (arche)typically, *Gshen rabs myi bo* and/or *Dur gshen rma da (na)*, who make a diagnosis and perform a rite. Often the rite is then related to the present with a formula, e.g., “what was beneficial in ancient times shall also be beneficial now. What was successful in ancient times shall be successful now” (*gna' phan da yang phan gna' gsod da yang bsod*; Pelliot tibétain 1136, l. 60).<sup>15</sup>

The matrimonial narrative trope, like the hunting trope, is in a sense a narrative formality to harming or killing off a character in a ritual antecedent tale so that they may then be healed or their funeral be performed. Its appearance immediately advertises imminent danger and/or death. This trope is widespread in Old Tibetan ritual literature (e.g., Pelliot tibétain 1040, Pelliot tibétain 1285, IOL Tib J 734), and in later ritual texts.<sup>16</sup> The matrimonial narrative trope is expressed clearly in the ritual narrative of the unhappy marriage of Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun in the ritual text Pelliot tibétain 1136 and in the Sad mar kar episode in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, which both Uray and Macdonald related to the former tale. In each case, a noble lady marries the king of Zhang zhung, and is unhappy. In each case, the unhappy wife sings a lament. For Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun, this precedes her suicide. For Sad mar kar, the lament precedes her coded instructions that implore her brother, Srong brtsan sgam po, to invade her husband's realm. For ease of reference, I present the overlapping passages, beginning with the unhappy marriage of Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun:

<sup>15</sup> For further background on such ritual liturgies, see Dotson (2008).

<sup>16</sup> Stein provides the most thorough study of these ritual liturgies, in which he refers to “paradigmes d'accident,” among which are included what I refer to as the matrimonial narrative trope (1971: 502–06).

'o na lcam lho rgyal byang mo tsun zhig / / yul chab kyi ya bgor / rje gu ge  
rkang phran dang gnyen dang gdumdubgyiste / rje gu ge rkang phran gyi  
gnye bo myi brgya rkya brgya zhig yas se byung na / / lcam lho rgyal byang  
mo tsun gyi mchid nas / /  
yul kha la r[ts]ang stod ni bkrod ching shul ring la / /  
zhang zhung gu ge rkang phran ni 'dris shing sdang /  
nya gro ni bcha zhing kha  
'is gsung nas / rtsidag gnag gis 'gegs ste de ru nongs na' (Pelliot tibétain 1136,  
ll. 46–49)

And then sister Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun was to unite in marriage with and as  
affine with Lord Gu ge Rkang phran in the land of Chab kyi ya bgo (“The  
Upper Head of the River [Gtsang po]”).<sup>17</sup> When Lord Gu ge Rkang phran’s  
groomsman came from above [with] one hundred men and one hundred  
horsemen,<sup>18</sup> sister Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun said,  
“Traversing the land of Kha la Rtsang stod, it is distant.  
Accustoming oneself to Zhang zhung Gu ge rkang phran, he is loathesome.  
Fish and wheat, when chewed, are bitter.”

<sup>17</sup> By the principle of the use of appositional synonyms or “noun pairs” in ritual language, e.g., “father and patriarch” (*pha dang yab*), “horse and equid” (*rta dang rmang*), *gdum* in the phrase *gnyen dang gdum du bgyis* must be a synonym of *gnyen* (“affine”). I relate it to the verb *'dum ba*, which means “to reconcile,” and assume that the bride/marriage is the nominalized, agreed-upon thing. I shall contextualize the use of noun pairs and appositional synonym phrases within the register of ritual language in greater detail elsewhere.

The name Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun is prefixed with *lcam*, which, rather than being the royal title “lady,” is the kinship term “sister”: it refers back to when she is introduced in the narrative as the daughter of Rtsang Ho de'i hos bdag and sister of Smra bon Zing ba'i zing skyas (variant: Sma bu Zing ba'i zing skyas); Pelliot tibétain 1136, ll. 30–32.

<sup>18</sup> The term *yas* means “from above,” as in the phrase *char pa yas bab*, “rain fell from above.” Zeisler relates *se* in *yas se* to “the morpheme *\*-su/\*-so*,” which was “applied to location adverbs.” She writes that the “geminated spelling (*yas.se*) might reflect an unclear syllable boundary and might thus indicate that the vowel was already about to be lost”; Zeisler (2011b: 284). This reading problematizes *rkya*, which, in an administrative context, is a taxable land unit; see Iwao (2009). Zeisler proposes to resolve this by suggesting that *rkyang* (“wild ass”) is intended. In fact, Bellezza already solved this problem in his translation of this passage by pointing out that *rkya* means “horseman”; Bellezza (2008: 528, n. 609; 2010: 50–51, n. 60). Bellezza supports his argument by citing compounds such as *dmag rkya* (“cavalry”) and *rkya dgu* (“nine horsemen”), and further relates this meaning of the word *rkya* to the Rol po rkya bdun, a famous group of seven mounted deities. To this we can add *rkya pa* or *rkya mi* as a synonym and variant, respectively, for *skya mi*, meaning “rider,” and the word *rkya rags*, which also means “horseman”; Zhang (1998: 98). The duplication in *myi brgya rkya brgya* could also be a type of hyperbaton that yields the compound *myi rkya*, of which there would be one hundred. This would be the inverse of the compound *rkya myi*, however, so I do not read it as a hyperbaton. It is also possible to read *myi brgya* and *rkya brgya* in apposition, as Bellezza does; (2008: 528).



So saying, she strangled herself with a black yak-hair cord and there she died.<sup>19</sup>

Chr. xi, Song of Princess Sad mar kar:

rgyal 'di 'i ring la / / zhang zhung lte bu / / gnyen gyi yang do / / 'thab kyI  
yang skal te / / zhang zhung bdag du' / / btsan mo sad mar kar / / lig myi  
rhya la chab srid la gshegs so / / snga na shud ke za rtsal thing shags mchis  
ste / / btsan mo dang ni myi bnal bar / / lig myi rhya la shud ke za rtsal ting  
shags gnang ste / / btsan mo yang lig myi rhya 'i so nam dang bu srid myi  
mdzad ching log / shIg na bzhugs par /; Pelliot tibétain 1287, ll. 398–401.

During the reign of this king, concerning Zhang zhung, they were paired [with Tibet] as affinal relatives, but also as rivals in conflict.

Princess (Btsan mo) Sad mar kar went on a political mission [of marriage] to Lig myi rhya in order to rule Zhang zhung.<sup>20</sup> At first, Lady Rtsal thing shags of

<sup>19</sup> Bellezza (2008: 528) first identified the correct reading of *rtsidag* as *rtsid thag*, something that previous scholars, perhaps paying undue deference to Old Tibetan syllable margins, unfortunately missed.

<sup>20</sup> The meaning of *bdag du* in the phrase / *zhang zhung bdag du' / / btsan mo sad mar kar / / lig myi rhya la chab srid la gshegs so* presents problems. Previous translators, including Bacot and Toussaint (Bacot, *et al.* 1940–1946: 155) and Macdonald (1971: 262) translated it as if it read *btsan mo sad mar kar / zhang zhung bdag lig myi rhya la chab srid la gshegs so*. If we ignore the phrase *zhang zhung bdag du'*, then Sad mar kar goes on a “political mission” to Lig myi rhya; we already have her ‘destination,’ namely her intended husband, Lig myi rhya. He could conceivably be in apposition with “to/as the ruler of Zhang zhung,” but the word order would be odd. Elsewhere in the *Chronicle*, he is referred to as “king” (*rgyal po*) of Zhang zhung. One solution, which I have opted for above, is to read *zhang zhung bdag du'* as adverbially qualifying Sad mar kar’s political mission to Lig myi rhya: she is going as ruler of Zhang zhung. Discussing this with colleagues – particularly, it must be said, Tibetan colleagues –, I have been struck by the extent to which they see this translation as a radical proposition, and the lengths to which they will go to try to revise or gloss this sentence. I shall therefore dwell on the matter briefly here, but rather than going into the cultural and gender politics that might lie behind some objections, I shall focus instead on what may be a stronger code of persuasion in this instance, namely grammar. In translating this passage, one must keep in mind the normative use of the terminative and allative particles in Old Tibetan, as discussed in some detail by Nathan Hill. Among the terminative’s most common uses, it appears with verbs of motion, and it is used adverbially; the allative often marks people and sentient beings, and it is not used for locations or movement (2011: 35, 15). One notes that the structure of the sentence agrees fairly well with that which Hill describes for the use of the phrase “to go on campaign” (*chab srid la gshegs*) in the Old Tibetan Annals: “(person)-ABS (starting place)-nas (ethnicity)-la-chab-srid-la (ending place)-TRM gsegs” (2011: 11). If one assumes that the “starting place” is omitted and the “ending place” has moved to the beginning of the sentence, one could argue that Sad mar kar goes “to” (du) a place called Zhang zhung Bdag. Since *bdag* is not a place name, one must “massage” it into another word, and thus misread *bdag* as “Bar ga” or some such word that better resembles a plausible place name within Zhang zhung. Unfortunately for such an argument, the word is clearly written *bdag*. Even assuming serious transmission errors, there is only a very slim chance that such an intervention could be correct. An obvious solution is that the terminative *du* in *zhang zhung bdag du* describes Sad mar kar’s role in the same fashion as *bag mar* in the phrase *bag mar gshegs* “went as bride,” or in the

the Shud ke [clan] being there, [Lig myi rhya] did not sleep with the princess [Sad mar kar], and she granted Lig myi rhya [leave to sleep with] Lady Rtsal thing shags of the Shud ke [clan]. The princess then would not attend to Lig myi rhya's matters or to bearing a son, and remained apart.

This state of affairs comes to the attention of Sad mar kar's brother the emperor, and he sends an envoy demanding that she get on with the important business of producing an heir so that she not become a source of conflict between Zhang zhung and Tibet. Sad mar kar entertains her brother's envoy on the banks of Lake Ma phang, and sings him four songs, each of a different character. The first is a lament, two quatrains of which overlap with Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun's pre-suicide lament. Here Sad mar kar uses double entendres to appear to be praising Zhang zhung when in fact she is reviling it. Here I excerpt only the part of the lament that overlaps with that of Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun, and convey the double entendre by italicizing the polyvalent words and placing the *sous-entendu* meaning in parentheses alongside.

. . . bran gyi nI skal pog pa /  
 / gu ge nI rkang pran zhig /  
       'khol du nI ma tho 'am /  
       / gu ge nI bdris shing sdang /

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similar uses of rgyal por “as king” and blon por “as minister” described by Hill (2011: 30–32, 35). Sad mar kar goes “as lord of Zhang zhung,” and the inclusion of the place name here accounts for its omission as the “ending place” within the “chab srid la gshegs construction.” This also makes explicit what is often left implicit in the phrase chab srid la gshegs, particularly in its matrimonial context: Tibetan princesses sent to foreign kingdoms or vassals, often as “treaty princesses,” could and in fact did exercise real political power; Stein (1973: 413, n.5); Dotson (2009: 35–36). In this case Sad mar kar's marriage also represents an agreement by Zhang zhung to submit to Tibet as its vassal. As we see from how the narrative unfolds, this state of affairs is rejected by Lig myi rhya, and Tibet is forced to press its point through its military, rather than by marital diplomacy. One objection to this interpretation is that Sad mar kar's tasks of keeping house and conceiving an heir do not seem to fit the role of “ruling” Zhang zhung. On the other hand, giving birth to a half-Tibetan heir was a central part of her mission, just as it was for Princess Khri bangs among the 'a zha from her arrival there in 689–690 and just as it was for Princess Khri mo stengs in Dags po from her arrival “to conduct politics” there in 688–689. Sad mar kar is in a sense a (literary) corollary to these great female rulers on the Tibetan plateau, and also to Empress Khri ma lod and Empress Wu. For more on these examples and for the key political role played by Tibet's princesses through dynastic marriage to foreign royals, including a discussion of the polyvalent phrase *chab srid la gshegs*, see Dotson (2009: 31–37).

/ zas kyI ni skal pog pa /  
 nya dang nI gro mchis te /  
 'tshal du nI ma tho 'aM  
 nya gro nI bcha' zhing kha' / (Pelliot tibétain 1287, ll. 409–11).

The share of bondservants allotted to me  
 Is Gu ge rkang pran.

To have them as servants, is it not *lofty*? (is it not *scorn*?)  
 Acquainted with Gu ge, it is *sincere*. (it is *loathsome*.)

The share of food allotted to me  
 Is fish and wheat.

To be given this, is it not *lofty*? (is it not *scorn*?)  
 Fish and wheat, when chewed, are *bitter*.<sup>21</sup>

After her songs, Srong brtsan sgam po's messenger requests a written message from her, but she refuses. She tells him, "I am pleased that the emperor my brother is well. As for what the emperor has commanded, I remain capable of facing either death or punishment" (*btsan pos bka' stsal pa nI / gum chad gnyis / rngo ji thog gis 'tshal zhing mchis so /*; Pelliot tibétain 1287, l. 426). She then gives him a sealed yak hat, inside of which she has hidden several pieces of turquoise. Srong brtsan sgam po, hearing his messenger's account of the songs, and examining the objects that his sister has sent him, understands their import and successfully conquers Zhang chung. We hear nothing more of Sad mar kar.

The nearly identical *mis en scène* and similar use of formulaic expressions demonstrate that these two episodes are both expressions of the matrimonial narrative trope, a common ritual narrative that presages and precedes the death or illness of one of the protagonists, and leads into the rites performed for him or her. The similar lament further links the situation of each woman. After Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun sings her lament, she kills herself. Sad mar kar sings nearly the same lament, and her doing

<sup>21</sup> On this translation of *ma tho 'am*, see Uray (1972: 9). The songs of Sad mar kar are full of double entendres, since she is transmitting a secret meaning to her brother. Thus *tho* "scorn" may be – depending on dialect – a homophone for *mtho* "high, lofty," allowing Sad mar kar to appear to praise Zhang chung to her Zhang chung audience while seeming to debase it to her Tibetan audience. Similarly, *sdang* means "hated," and the homophone *dang* means "pure." The intended double entendre with *kha* "bitter" escapes me, and it may be that in the final line she is revealing her scorn for what it is. Similar use of homophony and wordplay animate other songs in the *Chronicle*.

so signals that she too will soon die, whether as a consequence of her plot being discovered, or preemptively by her own hand.

We find a truncated version of the same lament in a divination prognosis, where it is a terrible augur: "...the wife despises her husband. Acquainted with Gu ge, it is coarse. Fish and barley meal when chewed are bitter." (*khab bdag sdang / gu ge ni 'dris shing gyong / nya bag ni bcas shing kha'*; IOL Tib J 739, 11 verso, ll. 2–3). The prognosis is said to be so bad that one must perform rituals in order to avert its malignant influence.<sup>22</sup> An even briefer version of the same lament may also be implicated in the suicide of Tha nga Pung mo tang in the matrimonial narrative in the "Tale of the *rgyal byin*." After the deaths of two successive husbands, due in part to what seem to be the nefarious powers of her bride wealth, Tha nga Pung mo tang sings a lament concerning her current, monkey-faced husband: "No matter what Monkey-Faced Thang ba does, I despise him." Tha nga Pung mo tang then commits suicide by strangulation.<sup>23</sup> The expression of a similar formula elsewhere suggests that the relationship between the Sad mar kar episode and the tale of Lho rgyal Byang mo tsun is not necessarily one of intertextuality or direct allusion, but a case where each narrative draws on a common pool of tradition that contains a matrimonial narrative and a (suicidal) lament.<sup>24</sup> More specifically, it is a case of the singer(s), author(s), editor(s), and compiler(s) of the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* making apt choices in order to dramatize Sad mar kar's plight through their narrative framing of her role.

We find similar motifs in rejections of offers of marriage within a ritual narrative from Dga' thang 'bum pa that also makes use of the matrimonial narrative trope. Thang ba rmu thang from the land of Rmu seeks a bride in the land of Rgya. The lady Rgya za Shangs kar rebuffs him by insulting the lord of Rmu, his land, his horses,

<sup>22</sup> The entire prognosis is as follows: @@@/ @/ @@/ kye lung nas phar bltas na / nas 'bras ni yul myi gnyan / sku 'khrungs ni za skar chung / khyi ma btsugs ni / khab bdag sdang / gu ge ni 'dris shing gyong / nya bag ni bcas shing kha' / ngo 'hre ched po yod pas / ngo yogs gi cho ga gyis shig / gsum yul rdzogs (IOL Tib J 739 11 recto, l. 11 – 11 verso, l. 4).

<sup>23</sup> Her lament: *spra zhal thang ba'i la cang mchis ji yang mchis na gdang la* (PT 1040, ll. 91–92). I have glossed *gdang* with *sdang*. Her suicide is more straightforward: *'geg ste nong so*; l. 100.

<sup>24</sup> For Uray (1972: 35–36), authorial agency for this allusion lies with Sad mar kar, who uses this trope in order to hide "her individual complaint in the enlarged poetic paraphrase. . . of the words of Gu-ge Rkang-phran's bride." Macdonald (1971: 264) is less committal on the issue of influence, preferring a view that is similar to my own in so far as she understands Sad mar kar's lament within the context of a literary of folkloric theme: "[u]ne des reproches exprimés par Sad-mar-kar appartient donc apparemment au thème folklorique ou littéraire préexistant de la mal-mariée, appliqué peut-être spécialement aux mariages contractés dans les provinces de l'ouest." Of course one cannot rule out Uray's assertion about an intertextual (or metaperformative) relationship between these two tales, and, it should be added, Uray's opinion is not necessarily in conflict with my assertion that both are informed by a matrimonial narrative trope drawn from a larger pool of tradition.

and so forth, e.g., “as for the meager servants of Rmu, there are none more difficult to control.”<sup>25</sup> Rejected, Thang ba rmu thang moves on to the next princess, the ill-fated match that precedes the inevitable crisis, and its resolution through ritual. While we do not find perfect parallels of the lament form here, we can note a thematic unity between the lament and the rejection. It is also of a piece with (or an inversion of) marriage songs, where, early on in the proceedings the prospective bride and her family customarily denigrate the groom’s land, and demand to be persuaded with fine words before assenting to the proposal.<sup>26</sup>

Were one ignorant of these markers of traditional referentiality in the Sad mar kar episode, one could likely work out some, but not all, of the meaning of her predicament and her lament. For example, one might reason that Sad mar kar, having failed in her apparent mission to conceive a half-Tibetan heir to the Zhang zhung throne, now promotes “plan B,” an invasion that will likely precipitate her death, which she might pre-empt by suicide. One could also cite the bravado of her response to her brother’s command. In addition, her final song may employ funerary imagery, but if so this is thickly veiled.<sup>27</sup> Still, those unversed in the idiom of this trope would find such a reading to be a reach, and could insist, for example, that the princess merely complains about life in a foreign land. Appreciating the meaning of Sad mar kar’s lament and her imbrication within a matrimonial narrative trope, not only can we authoritatively settle such speculative arguments, but we can experience the narrative closer to the way in which it was intended.

The comparative opacity of this passage, when divorced from its traditional referentiality, makes for an interesting comparison with a much more famous epic lament, which I mention here to further demonstrate the principle of traditional

<sup>25</sup> *Rmu khol rag pa la bkol rka ma mchIs so; Rnel dri ’dul ba’i thabs* 20, l. 1; Pa tshab and Glang ru, eds. 2007: 44, 151. The passage is paraphrased in Bellezza 2013: 151.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Karmay and Nagano, eds. 2002: 217–18.

<sup>27</sup> The last lines of her final song are among the most difficult to translate: *yar gyi ni bye ma la / lhan lhan ni ’gros mo ’di // skyi ’i ni pur thabsu / za dur ni btab kyang rung*; Pelliot tibétain 1287, 423–24. Bacot translated “Et sur le sable d’été/ Voici réunis le pas./ Pour gratter l’envers d’une peau,/ Il faut la fêrir du râcloir” Bacot, *et al.* (1940-1946: 158). Uray (1972: 35) translates: “In the upper valley of Skyi at dusk the chopsticks can be pinned (already into food).” Most recently, Drikung Kyapgon Chetsang translated “This traveler toiling up/ The sandy slope above/ May place the funeral food/ Before this canyon corpse”; Drikung (2011: 252). The latter funerary image comes from the word *dur*, meaning “tomb,” and we know that there was a custom in early Tibet of placing food in the tomb for the deceased. It is criticized, for example, in the *’Phrul kyi byig shus phyi ma la bstan pa’i mdo* in Pelliot tibétain 126: “One places good food in the tomb. Though it may consist of provisions for a thousand years, [the dead] are powerless to eat it, and so it is always leftovers” (*kha zas bzang po dur du bcugs // lo stong bar kyi brgyags yod kyang // za ba’i dbang myed yun du lus*; Pelliot tibétain 126, ll. 20–22).

referentiality and because it draws on the work of a leading scholar in the field. I refer to John Miles Foley's analysis of Andromache's preemptive lament for her husband Hektor in *Iliad* 6: 407–32. There Andromache delivers “a formal lament, a specific and recognizable subgenre that according to epic convention confronts the reality of a loved one's actual death.” Only rather than addressing a corpse, she speaks directly to her still-living husband (Foley 1999: 188–93). Those ignorant of the traditional reference point of a formal lament would still understand that Andromache speaks to her husband as though he has already fallen. The form in which it comes communicates to a traditional(ly literate) audience an additional pathos. Sad mar kar's lament, and her imbrication within a matrimonial narrative trope, conveys her impending demise in a way that is not otherwise transparent. Grasping the traditional referentiality of her situation and her lament, we not only access a deeper and more visceral, allusive meaning in this scene, but we more clearly comprehend her plight.

## Reflections

The *Old Tibetan Chronicle's* deployment of the matrimonial narrative trope in its telling of the Sad mar kar episode clues us in to how the narrative was intended to be received by a traditional audience, and how the *Chronicle* imagined this audience. Imagining an audience is a key aspect of the way in which a work of art, literature, performance, or historical narrative fashions a community, invites participation in a given subjectivity, and, in turn, forges a collective memory.<sup>28</sup> The subjectivity that the *Chronicle* invites has its own heroic, royalist ideology, but its codes of persuasion are rooted in traditional forms like the matrimonial narrative trope. The *Old Tibetan Chronicle's* encoding of a ‘national’ consciousness through traditional forms constitutes one of the key functions of narrative history.<sup>29</sup> In this essay I have refrained from opening up the can of worms marked “genre” (e.g., epic, chronicle, history, chronicle epic), but of course its forging of a ‘national’ memory and its creative refiguration of events through traditional narrative forms is relevant to the question of genre. One other point that I have not addressed, but which will inevitably be asked, is whether or not the Sad mar kar

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<sup>28</sup> I draw here on Hayden White's comments on ‘ideology’: “...the ideological element in art, literature, or historiography consists of the projection of the kind of subjectivity that its viewers or readers must take on in order to experience it as art, literature, or historiography. . . . Historiography is, by its very nature, the representational practice best suited to the production of the ‘law-abiding’ citizen” (White 1987: 86–87).

<sup>29</sup> For similar reflections in the context of early Sri Lankan historiography, e.g., the *Dīpavaṃsa*, the *Mahāvaṃsa*, and their putative sources, see Bechert (1978: 8).

episode, and by extension other episodes in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*, reflect historical events. I shall not address the question directly, since the main point of this paper is not an assessment of the historical authenticity of Sad mar kar or of the conquest(s) of Zhang zhung. Instead I shall only make the fairly obvious point that Sad mar kar's imbrication within a matrimonial narrative trope is not, by itself, grounds for doubting that she existed. Historical figures are and always have been cast as characters within narratives whose trajectories are already in motion. The existence of a Tibetan princess named Sad mar kar should be confirmed or denied based on the usual evidence-based grounds, for example, her presence or absence in other sources. Leaving the matter of historical authenticity aside, and focusing instead on the history of narrative and the history of memory, we can turn to the traditional literary qualities of the Sad mar kar episode in particular and the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* in general, and examine how these were put to use in inviting its audience into a shared 'national' memory and subjectivity. It is this feature that makes the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* such a fascinating text and a forerunner to later Tibetan religious narratives and their articulation of a new identity for Tibet, whether Buddhist or Bon po.

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# The naming of Tibetan religion:

## *Bon* and *Chos* in the Tibetan imperial period

Sam van Schaik

### Introduction

For some time now there has been disagreement about what we should call the religious practices that existed in Tibet alongside Buddhism during the Tibetan imperial period – the seventh to mid-ninth centuries. Within the Bon tradition we find various periodizations, the best known of which is the three historical stages of ‘old Bon’ (*bon rnying*), ‘eternal Bon’ (*g.yung drung bon*) and ‘new Bon’ (*gsar bon*). In the Buddhist polemical works, the earliest stage of Bon is *brdol bon*, which we can gloss as ‘indigenous Bon’, and this is followed by ‘deviant Bon’ (*’khyar bon*) and then translated Bon (*bsgyur bon*) (cf. Martin 2001: 41–2 and Bjerken 2004). The definitions of each stage, and the time-periods assigned to them differ, but what the Buddhist and Bon classifications have in common is an assumption that a tradition known as Bon existed from the earliest times.

Both sets of classifications date from the eleventh century or later, and both are called into doubt by earlier documentary evidence. This evidence is found among the manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave, dating from the ninth to tenth centuries. Rolf Stein, reviewing several Dunhuang manuscripts that use the term *bon*, concluded that “le mot *bon* seul semble désigner un rite. Il ne s’agit pas du Bon comme principe de philosophie ou comme nom de la doctrine postérieure [the word *bon* seems to designate a ritual. It is not a philosophical principle nor the name of the later doctrine]” (Stein 1988: 52).<sup>1</sup> This view was subsequently challenged by Samten Karmay, who wrote:

My view is that a number of Dunhuang MSS ... attest to the existence of a widespread belief designated as Bon in the royal period and that this is

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<sup>1</sup> For the context in Arthur McKeown’s English translation, see Stein (2010: 269). The translation here is mine.

different from the ‘organized Bon’ by which we mean what the Buddhists call *bsgyur bon* and the later Bonpo call *g.yung drung bon*. (Karmay 1998 [1983]: 168)<sup>2</sup>

Karmay drew upon one manuscript in particular to argue the point that the term *bon* referred to “the existence of a widespread belief.” This is Pelliot tibétain 972, a kind of introduction to Buddhism for Tibetans, which contains a line criticizing “the belief in heretical *bon*” (*mu stegs bon la yid ches ste*// Pelliot tibétain 972, 2v.3). However, this statement still begs the question of what is signified by *bon*. In fact, the manuscript itself provides a clue in the following lines, which refer to the divination practice known as *mo bon* (*mo bon dag la srid ma ltos*// Pelliot tibétain 972, 2v.4).<sup>3</sup> This was pointed out by Henk Blezer in a sustained critique of the argument that some kind of ‘organized Bon’ is to be discerned behind the term *bon* in the Dunhuang manuscripts:

Karmay quite rightly notes that the term *bon* occasionally (but only very rarely) is also used for something of ‘religious’, probably mainly ritual, content and cites several Dunhuang-period passages in support. On close examination, however, these occurrences do not really affect the above analysis. Sparse references to *bon* ‘religious’ (ritual) content also invariably appear to refer to the specific content of ritual performance of Bon specialists and they do not imply the more abstract notion of some kind of self-conscious, organized, popular or elite Bon religion. (Blezer 2008: 428)

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<sup>2</sup> This statement occurs in an addendum which does not appear in the original (1983) article. John Vincent Bellezza expresses the same view; he argues that the archaic materials consider “the concept of *bon* as the entire spectrum of rituals and the philosophical and symbolical systems that lie behind them” (Bellezza 2008: 498). However, he does not offer specific citations in support of this view.

<sup>3</sup> Karmay read this as a reference to a female *bon* priest: *bon mo*. However, *mo bon* is well attested elsewhere in the manuscripts as a reference to a *mo* divination ritual. Moreover, this interpretation is supported by another manuscript, IOL Tib J 360/10, which contains the same verse; here the line is: *mo bon ltas la srid ma bltos*. The presence of *ltas* where the other text has *dag* makes it even more clear that the context here is divination. Neither Karmay nor Blezer noticed that both texts seem to be drawing on an apocryphal Chinese sūtra, the *Bayang jing* 八陽經 which was translated into Tibetan several times and is found in the Dunhuang manuscripts in several recensions. One recension of the *Bayang jing*, which Stein describes as being in the ‘Chinese vocabulary’, uses the term *bon po* (Pelliot tibétain 748) as well as *mo bon* (Pelliot tibétain 2206); see Stein 2010: 31–35. Here the terms are translations from the Chinese, with *bon po* used for *xieshi* 邪師 ‘heretical teacher’ or ‘sorcerer’.

Thus it seems that these arguments over the significance of *bon* in the Dunhuang manuscripts return us again and again to Stein's definition: a kind of ritual. There is a growing consensus among contemporary scholars that there was no organized (or even disorganized) religion going by the name of *bon* in the Tibetan imperial period.<sup>4</sup> Yet we should not be lead into thinking that we have only two alternatives: either to accept the there was a religion before and during the Tibetan imperial period that went by the name of *bon*, or to reject the whole concept of a pre-Buddhist religion. Where could we go from here?

The problem is in large part linguistic. And it is about historical specificity, about how words were being used at a particular time. So we need a close attention to linguistic context, whether looking at a Buddhist text written in Tibet, a translation, or a text from a non-Buddhist source. We also need to choose documentary sources to which we can assign as narrow a range of dates as possible. In this paper I hope to offer the opportunity to move this debate forward by presenting some new sources, and showing how they may help us towards new insights. In particular, I want to point to (a) the existence of *bon po* and other non-Buddhist ritualists at the local level during the imperial period, and (b) the agency of the early Tibetan Buddhists in conceptualizing the manifold Tibetan rituals and myths as a unified whole, elucidating and perhaps creating the very idea of a non-Buddhist Tibetan religion.

### 'The Little Religion': Buddhist presentations of an 'other'

Our main literary sources on non-Buddhist ritual traditions are, as previously mentioned, from the Dunhuang caves. The antiquity of these sources has recently been challenged by a number scholars.<sup>5</sup> The Dunhuang cave was closed at the beginning of

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<sup>4</sup> The problem of naming also applies to the anthropological study of non-Buddhist religious practice in Tibet. This is what Rolf Stein referred to as "the nameless religion." More recently, Charles Ramble has used the term *pagan* in his work, and justified it as follows:

'Pre-Buddhist' and 'non-Buddhist' are inadequate for a number of reasons: the first not least because it begs important questions about the relative antiquity of the two traditions in the region, while the second fails to distinguish other forms of 'non-Buddhism'—such as Hinduism—that exist in Mustang. 'Popular,' another handy evasion, is perhaps even more misleading because of its implication that the cults of place-gods lie within the sphere of public activity, whereas they are in fact quite specialised fields. Whatever its shortcomings, 'pagan' at least expresses the essentially local character of these cults (the Latin *pagus* could be very acceptably rendered by the Tibetan word *yul*), and also suggests an ethos that is at odds with the tenets of high religion, whether Buddhism or Bon (Ramble 1998: 124).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Walter (2009: xxi–xxvii). For documents proven to post-date the Tibetan empire, see Uray (1981) and Takeuchi (2004). For manuscripts relevant to the present enquiry, see Blezer (2008: 423–4) and Dotson (2008: 56).



the eleventh century, and a position of scepticism would suggest that we do not expect any of the texts to date from any earlier than this. That did not stop an earlier generation of scholars from taking certain texts as representative of religion during the era of Srong brtsan sgam po, that is, as far back as the early seventh century.<sup>6</sup> Fortunately, we are now better placed to use palaeography and codicology to date manuscripts. This, along with linguistic assessment of whether language is archaic (though still open to the objection of feigned archaism) offer the prospect of a more confident dating of the manuscript sources.<sup>7</sup>

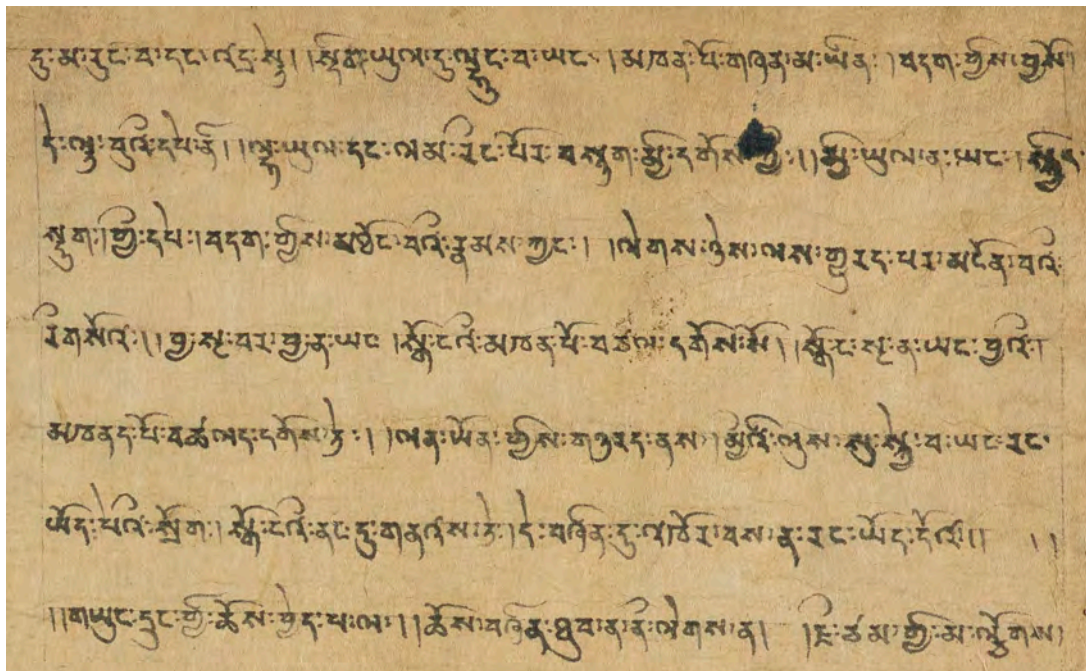


Figure 1 IOL Tib J 1746

Given these doubts, in this section and the next I will present sources that can be dated to the imperial period with reasonable certainty. We begin with a scroll, IOL Tib J 1746 (Figure 1), which I believe to date from the imperial period on the grounds of codicology, palaeography and linguistic analysis:<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Most notably, Ariane Macdonald (1971), who was extensively criticised by Stein for holding this position (Stein 1985).

<sup>7</sup> See van Schaik (2013).

<sup>8</sup> I would like to thank Kazushi Iwao for first bringing this manuscript to my notice.

(i) Codicology: the manuscript is a scroll in the same format as the scrolls used to copy the *Aparimitāyurnāma sūtra* in the middle of the ninth century, by the order of the emperor Khri lde gtsug brtsan (r. 815–841). Also, unlike Tibetan scrolls from the post-imperial Dunhuang, the format of the scroll is horizontal, with two columns of text written on each scroll panel. The dimensions of each panel are 28 cm by 41.5 cm, and each panel has been marked with margins and guidelines. In all of these codicological features, the scroll matches the most common format for copying the *Aparimitāyurnāma sūtra* carried out at toward the end of the reign of Khri lde gtsug brtsan. It is likely that the use of left-over paper for other purposes occurred soon after this time, that is, after 841. Thus an estimate for the copying of the text would be at some point in the 840s.

(ii) Palaeography: the writing style of IOL Tib J 1746 is actually more archaic than most copies of the *Aparimitāyurnāma sūtra*. It falls within what I have called the ‘square style’, which is found in the *Old Tibetan Annals*, as well as in certain Buddhist texts, like a copy of the *Samdhinirmocana sūtra* brought to Dunhuang from Central Tibet (IOL Tib J 194).<sup>9</sup> Regular features of the square style seen in this manuscript include the short descenders and *shad*, the four-side *ba* and head of *ga* (in other styles these are triangular). The scribe has also used the double *tsheg* in preference to the single, and sometimes uses a mid-line *tsheg* after *nga* (where it is placed inside the space of the letter itself). The presence of the square style is an indicator that the manuscript was written in the imperial period.<sup>10</sup>

(iii) Linguistic analysis: The text contains frequent occurrences of the archaic *da drag* and *’a brten*. These alone might be conscious archaicisms, but the text also has many linguistic features that suggest that it predates any standardization of Buddhist translation practices (see Scherrer-Schaub 2002). For example, throughout the text, the word ‘Buddha’ is not translated, but transliterated as *’b’u dha*. We also see the pre-reform use of *g.yung drung*, and the presence of some terms which are simply not seen in later dictionaries, like *lan yon*.

IOL Tib J 1746 is essentially a treatise on the advantages of Buddhism over Tibetan beliefs and rituals. It is written in the first person, giving the impression of a sermon delivered by a missionary to a dubious audience, trying to reach out with an informal style and examples drawn from everyday life. The following passage is representative of this approach:

<sup>9</sup> Evidence of the Central Tibetan provenance of IOL Tib J 194 is that the paper is composed of Daphne fibres, which are not found in manuscripts produced in Dunhuang; see Helman-Ważny & van Schaik (2013).

<sup>10</sup> See van Schaik (2013).

lha yul dang lam rŋng por bsnyag myi dgos kyI// myi yul na yang/ skyid  
sdug/ gyI dpe/ bdag gyis mthong ba'I rnams kyang// legs nyes las gyurd par  
mngon ba'I rŋgso'// bya snga bar bya na yang/ sgo nga'I mkhan po btsal dgos  
so// sgo nga snga na yang bya'I mkhand po btshald dgos te// (IOL Tib J 1746,  
1b.2-5)

It is not necessary to pursue the long route to the land of the gods. Even in the land of men I have seen many examples of happiness and suffering and it is clear that this comes from good and bad behaviour. If you want to know what came before the bird, you need to find an expert on eggs. And if you want to know what came before the egg, you need to find an expert in that!

Despite this conversational style, the text is quite scathing when it comes to discussion of non-Buddhist religious ritual and belief:

chos chu ngu la chags nas/ nI// lha dang gnam la bskurd// rung ba gchig  
tsham byung na nI/ legs pa'I chos kyang myi dgos par skad/ zero<d> <te>//  
bde skyid pa'I/ lam ni/ sgo pye ba bzhin 'dug ste'/ tshor ba ni thard/ ma tsho  
zhŋng myi nyand pa nI/ nad pa sman 'thung du ma rung ba dang 'dra ste//  
sdig yul du lhung ba yang/ mkhan po gzhan ma yin/ bdag gyis byaso/ (IOL  
Tib J 1746, 1a.14-1b.1)

Those who are attached to the little religion propitiate the deities and the sky, and if even a single good thing occurs, they say that they don't need the excellent religion. The path of joy is like opening a door – one feels liberated. [The little religion] offers no sustenance and is useless. It is like being ill and drinking medicine that has no benefit: you will fall into the land of suffering. There is no other expert – you have to do it yourself.

Here we have a characterization of the non-Buddhist religion from the Buddhist point of view – propitiation (*bskurd*) of the gods and the sky. The important role of the sky in early Tibetan mythology is well attested; like *lha*, the term *gnam* appears in the

Dunhuang manuscripts containing non-Buddhist narratives, such as ‘the age of decline’.<sup>11</sup> And the supplication of deities, often via sacrificial rituals, appears in a number of characterizations of the pre-Buddhist religion.

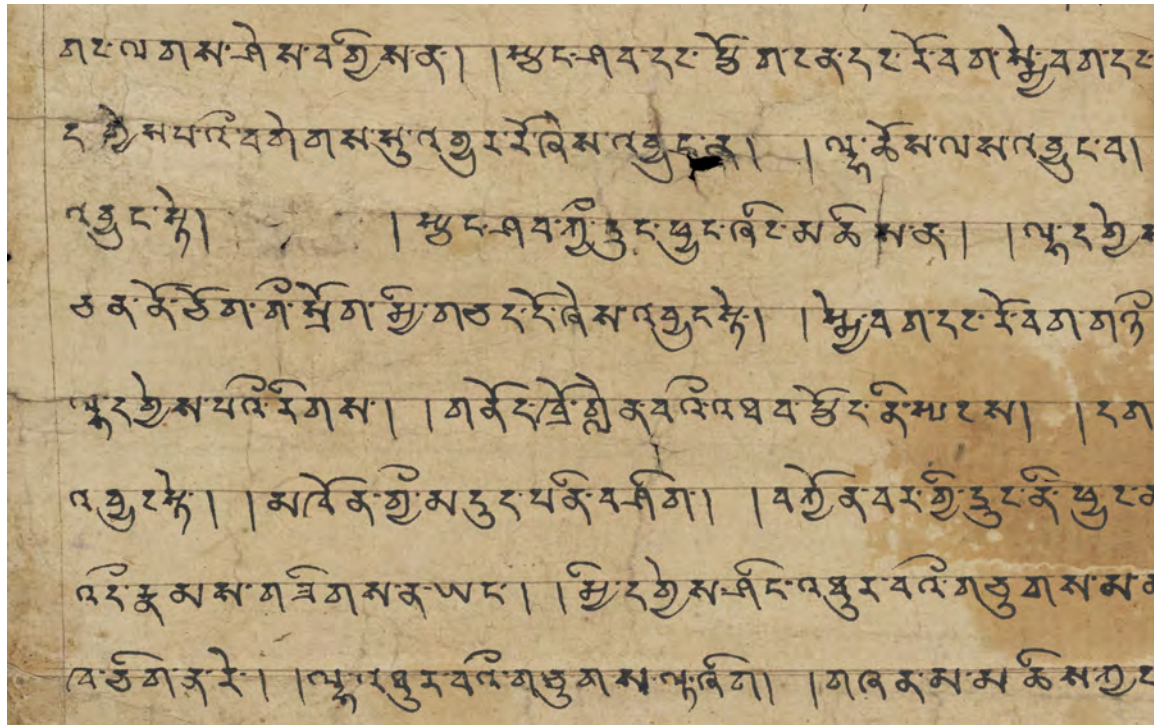


Figure 2 IOL Tib J 990

It is worth briefly comparing this characterization of Tibetan beliefs with another previously unstudied treatise (unfortunately fragmentary) on non-Buddhist practices, IOL Tib J 990 (Figure 2). This text addresses the concerns of Tibetans who are anxious about avoiding the displeasure (*myi dgyes*) of the deities. This text contains a great deal of archaic vocabulary, and is difficult to translate. Essentially, it presents a softer approach than that of IOL Tib J 1746, not criticizing the non-Buddhist religion directly, but merely suggesting that the ethical precepts of *lha chos*, the “divine religion” (i.e. Buddhism) are the best way to avoid the deities’ displeasure. Such references to Buddhism as *lha chos* blur the linguistic distinction between the old and new religions:

<sup>11</sup> See IOL Tib J 734 and 735, and the edition and translation in Thomas 1957. In the commentary on the ritual text *Rgyud gsum pa* in IOL Tib J 711, it is said of the deity Eldest Son of the Moon (*zla ba'i bu chen po*), that the monks called him Devaputra (*lha'i bu*), while the bonpos called him Sky-deity (*gnam lha*). The text itself may well be from the tenth century. See IOL Tib J 711, f.4a and the discussion of this in Stein (2010: 35).

*lha chos* is a good Buddhist term, but it also has associations with Tibetan ritual terminology like *lha bon* (see the sources discussed in the next section).

Reference to Buddhism as *lha chos* is also consistent in the popular *Sayings of the Wise Monk* (*'Phrul gyi byig shu*), found in several versions among the Dunhuang manuscripts. Matthew Kapstein mentions this as one of a group of early texts providing “evidence of the production of an indigenous Tibetan didactic literature whose primary aim is the propagation of the doctrines of rebirth and moral causation” (Kapstein 2000: 44). IOL Tib J 990 criticizes Tibetan rituals (like animal sacrifice), but preserves and to some extent appeals to Tibetan beliefs (like the importance of pleasing the deities). An objection put into the mouth of a non-Buddhist Tibetan explains the basic characteristics of Tibetan ritual, as the invocation (*brjod*) and supplication (*gsol*) of deities through sacrifice:

kha cig na re// lha 'thur ba'I gcugs lha zhig// gzhan ma mchis kyang lha  
brjed [read: brjod] pa la tha dad de// sangs rgyas nI ska ma chos su gsol//  
bdag cag gI sgo lha dang// yul lha ni srog chags kyls gsol te// brjod pa'i cho  
ga myI 'thun bas// myi dgyes shing 'thur bar 'gyur ro zhes mchi ba dag kyang  
mchis grang ste// (IOL Tib J 990, ll.11–13)

Some say: “When the deity is disturbed, even if there are other [methods], the invocation of the deity is the best. The Buddhists pray to *ska ma* religion. With our gate deities and local deities, we pray by [killing] living creatures. Because of the conflict between these rituals of invocation, there will be unhappiness and disturbance.”<sup>12</sup>

As an alternative to such rituals, IOL Tib J 1746 promotes the figure of the Buddha as a figure of compassion who treats everyone equally. It also emphasises the message of personal responsibility for one's own fate that is entailed by the Buddhist understanding of *karma* as the effects of one's own actions:

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<sup>12</sup> The 'gate deities' (*sgo lha*) feature in the contemporary rituals of the people of Mustang, as recorded by Charles Ramble (2008: 207).

'b'u dha mnga' che la thug rje che zhing/ snyoms par mdzad de// gnyisu ma mchis par gchig du dgongs na// legs byed pa <lta>/ lha yul du sus drangs// nyes/ byed pas skyid pa'I sar/ myi tard par/ sus bgags te/ na rag du lhung zhes byas na// skyid sdug/ gag bdam ba'I dbang bdag la yod pas rung// legs pa'I chos rang yod pa/ (IOL Tib J 1746, 2b.1–4)

The mighty Buddha is vastly compassionate and treats everyone equally. Thinking of them as one, without making distinctions, he acts for their welfare. This is excellent. Whoever tries to be conducted to the land of the gods by committing sins will not be liberated to the place of joy. You may say 'anyone who stops doing this will fall into hell', but I have the power to choose between joy and suffering, because I have the excellent religion.

Here the preacher contrasts the audience's fear of the consequences of stopping their ritual propitiation of the deities with his own Buddhist confidence in the karmic efficacy of his own actions. The description of the Tibetan audience's beliefs in a 'land of the gods' (*lha yul*) on the one hand and a hell (*na rag*) or 'land of suffering' (*sdig yul*) on the other are seen in other early sources.<sup>13</sup> The attempt to replace the traditional Tibetan world-view with one of individual responsibility by emphasising the workings of karma is found in many other Tibetan Buddhist tracts from this early period; indeed, Matthew Kapstein has argued for central role of the ideas of karma and rebirth in the conversion of the Tibetans to Buddhism.<sup>14</sup> The frequent references in IOL Tib J 1746 to those who do not heed the Buddha's message suggest that it comes from a time when Buddhism was still far from established. The author complains that, "even if they hear the scriptures with their ears, they are not able to retain them and study them" (*yi ge las rnar thos kyang / brnags shing nyand du ma btub pa/* IOL Tib J 1746, 2b.7). This is also expressed in a metaphor:

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<sup>13</sup> See the discussion in Stein (2010: 58–59). These two terms for heaven and hell are found in the various versions of the *Sayings of the Wise Monk* (the most complete versions are in Pelliot tibétain 126 and 992/2), which seems to be an early Buddhist missionizing text similar in intent to IOL Tib J 1746.

<sup>14</sup> See the early chapters of Kapstein (2000), especially pp.42–6.

dper na [ny]I [ma] shar na pa'I '[od] kyis / gar gyang snang zhing khebs ste/ /  
[k]un kyī mthong na' / / mus long gIs ma mthong gzhang kung / khas pub  
pa'I 'og du myi snang ba dang 'dra' ste/ (IOL Tib J 1746, 1a.9–11)

For example, when the sun rises, everything is illuminated and covered, and it is seen by all. Yet the blind do not see it, and concealed valleys are not illuminated.

Though this striking text has many interesting features, the one I want to focus on here is that non-Buddhist beliefs and practices are discussed without the use of the word *bon*.<sup>15</sup> In particular, IOL Tib J 1746 is one of very few early sources that makes explicit reference to Tibetan non-Buddhist practices *in general* (rather than specific ritual techniques); these are consistently discussed as a form of *chos*: either as ‘the bad religion’ (*chos ngan pa*) or ‘the little religion’ (*chos chu ngu*). Buddhism, on the other hand, is the Buddha’s religion, or *buddhadharma* (*chos 'b'u dha*), the good religion (*chos bzang po* / *chos legs pa*), the correct religion (*chos yang thag pa*) or the great religion (*chos chen po*). Particularly striking is the term *g.yung drung gyi chos*. The term *g.yung drung* was used extensively in early Buddhist translations, but was later generally replaced by *yang dag pa*, eventually falling out of use in most Buddhist contexts, and conversely becoming especially significant in the post-tenth century Bonpo religion. The use of *g.yung drung gyi chos* to refer to Buddhism in IOL Tib J 1746 shows that it was still considered an entirely appropriate epithet for Buddhism itself.

References to the ‘little religion’ might remind us of anthropological distinctions between the great tradition and little traditions. But the way the Buddhist author of IOL Tib J 1746 uses the terms is entirely to elevate the great and belittle the little. He writes:

cher ni chos dang 'b'u dha yI yon// chung ngu ni bdag nyId/ kyis log pa la ma  
bltas pa'I yon te/ (IOL Tib J 1746, 2b.5–6)

<sup>15</sup> Note that the text also lacks reference to *bon po* or *gshen*; instead we have *mkhan po*. Stein (2010: 21) has shown that in Buddhist translations, *mkhan po* (or the expressly pejorative *log pa'i mkhan po* and *yon po'i mkhan po*) can serve the same role as *bon po*.



‘Greatness’ is the qualities of the Buddha and [his] religion. ‘Littleness’ is the quality of my not having recognized my errors.

There are scriptural precedents for this: though the term *chos chung ngu* is far from common, it appears in a number of sutras, including the *Vimalakīrtinirdeśa*. And in the *Ratnakūta sūtra* there is the line, “those who reside in houses possess the little religion; those who go forth possess the great religion” (*khyim na gnas pa ni chos chung ngu dang ldan pa'o // rab tu byung ba ni chos chen po dang ldan pa'o //* 'Phags pa khyim bdag drag shul can gyis zhus pa zhes Derge, Dkon brtsegs, D63, f.272a) Behind all of this is, of course, the Sanskrit word *dharma*. The word is notoriously polyvalent; in the context in which we find the word in IOL Tib J 1746 and its scriptural sources, the following extract from the definition of *dharma* in Monier-William's dictionary is relevant: “usage, practice, customary observance or prescribed conduct, duty.” I think ‘customary observance’ and ‘prescribed conduct’ in particular are helpful definitions for our reading of IOL Tib J 1746. We should also consider the more specific religious definitions that Monier-Williams gives: ‘virtue, morality, religion, religious merit, good works’. Some of these signifiers also seem to be present in IOL Tib J 1746, especially when the author refers to Buddhism as merely *chos* without qualification.

Thus I disagree with Michael Walter's assessment that *chos* and *bon* had essentially the same meaning – a ritual method – in the imperial period.<sup>16</sup> IOL Tib J 1746 shows that *chos* was used to refer to a general agglomeration of behaviours and beliefs, much as *dharma* can be used this way in Buddhist scriptures, and in later Tibetan literature. The ‘little religion’ or ‘bad religion’ is contrasted with ‘the great religion’, the ‘good religion’, ‘the Buddha's religion’. There is an equivalence implicit in the use of the same word, *chos*, for both. The two are equal and opposite. This tells us that the writer of IOL Tib J 1746 considered that the Buddha's *chos* had a competitor, not in the form of

<sup>16</sup> Walter attempts to separate *chos* from its association with *dharma* by citing the appearance of the term *chos tshul* in the *Skye shi 'khor lo* (Pelliot tibétain 220 *et al.*) as an example of *chos* being “an apparently non-Buddhist term in a non-Buddhist environment” (Walter 2009: 73, note 84). Here I think Walter should have remembered better his own insistence that none of our surviving literary texts predate Buddhism, and that Tibetan literacy co-evolved with Buddhism. The *Skye shi 'khor lo* is a Buddhist text, if an unusual one, and the term *chos tshul* (Skt. *dharmanaya / dharmanetri*) is common in Buddhist scriptures. Walter gives no other examples to show that *chos* should be understood outside of the meanings of *dharma*. However, his position on *chos* later leads him to assert that “it is as if *chos* were the term from one language for the ritually correct way to do something, and *bon* the same from another” (Walter 2009: 192). There seems to be a misconception behind this statement, that if *chos* is used to refer to something other than Buddhism, some pre-Buddhist use must be behind this. Of course, *chos* (like *dharma*) can refer to many things other than Buddhism.



specific disparate rituals, but as another form of *chos*. Thus for this writer, who was probably situated in the Tibetan imperial period, there was some kind of organized religion in competition with Buddhism, and if that is too strong, at least a conglomeration of beliefs and practices that posed a threat to Buddhism.

The uses of *chos* in IOL Tib J 1746 also sheds some light on the well-known edict ascribed to Khri strong lde brtsan. Consider the following passage:

de nas dge ba'i bshes gnyen gyis bstangs te chos kyang gsan/ yi ge yang sphyan  
sngar brims nas/ sangs rgyas kyi chos dpel zhing mdzad par bsgroms so// de  
na bod kyi chos rnying pa ma lags la/ sku lha gsol ba dang cho ga myi mthun  
pas/ kun kyang ma legs su dogs te/ la la ni sku la dmar yang dogs/ la la ni  
chab srid god gyis kyang dogs/ la la ni mi nad phyugs nad byung gis kyang  
dogs/ la la ni mu ge langs babs kyis kyang dogs so// (Coblin 1990: 167, l. 110b)

Then in the company of a teacher of virtue I listened to the religion (*chos*) and the texts were brought before my eyes. Then I attended to<sup>17</sup> the practice and propagation of the religion of the Buddha (*sangs rgyas kyi chos*). In it, there was nothing of the old religion of Tibet (*bod kyi chos rnying pa*).<sup>18</sup> The invocation of the deities (*sku lha*) and the rituals were not in harmony with it. Therefore they were all designated improper. Some were designated as demeaning<sup>19</sup> the imperial presence. Some were designated as damaging the state. Some were designated as causing diseases in humans and cattle. Some were designated as bringing on famines.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Here I read the text's *sgroms* as *sgoms*; Coblin (1990:175) suggests *sgrims*, 'to concentrate one's energies upon.'

<sup>18</sup> Here I follow the two text exemplars that have *lags na* rather than *legs pa* (the latter is favoured by Coblin).

<sup>19</sup> Here I follow Walter's translation, amending *dmar* to *dman*.

<sup>20</sup> My translation here differs in some respects from previous ones. That of Kapstein (2000: 53) seems to be mistaken in interpreting the list of negative qualities as being suspicions cast upon Buddhism by the anti-Buddhist faction in Tibet. Richardson's (1998: 93) translation is better, and Michael Walter's (1991: 72 note 84) better still. However, I take issue with Walter's translation in this line: "At this point, excepting the old Tibetan *chos*, all [other] rituals at all, because they were rituals not in accord with the *sku lha gsol ba*, were considered to be not good." The insertion of "[other]" here turns the meaning of this line around, so that "the old religion of Tibet" is excepted from the emperor's criticism, rather than being the object of criticism. I think this is a mistake. On the other hand, it is acceptable to translate *sku lha gsol ba dang cho ga myi mthun pa* as "the rituals were not in accord with the supplication of the *sku lha*." This choice of translation supports Walter's readings of the terms *sku bla / lha* as "human beings representing powerful spiritual beings" who played a crucial role in the imperium (Walter 1991: 104). However, my reading is based on the dyadic nature of the rhetoric of the edict (which is similar to IOL Tib J 1746), which sets the

The main thing I want to draw attention to in this passage is the complementarity of “the Buddha’s religion” on the one hand, and “the old religion of Tibet” on the other. This dyad of two forms of *chos*, equal and opposite, matches what we see in IOL Tib J 1746. In the edict, both kinds of *chos* refer to comparable entities, which we can translate as ‘religion’ (which I do here, without asserting that this is the best translation) or as ‘customary observance or prescribed conduct’. I do not think that Michael Walter’s assessment, based on this same passage, that *chos* refers to “a sort of ritual procedure” is good enough. I also disagree with Michael Walter’s argument that *bon* does not appear in these edicts because it essentially meant the same as *chos* and the two terms could be substituted for each other, as names for a ritual method (Walter 2009: 192, 211 note 43). Contrary to such a view, the passage cited above makes it clear that “the old religion of Tibet” comprises a number of individual ritual procedures (*cho ga*). Thus *chos* in the edict is an umbrella term that indicates a *complex of practices*.

Surely the emperor, and the author of IOL Tib J 1746, would call the whole complex of non-Buddhist beliefs and practices *bon* if that is what they were generally known as. But they do not. So from these sources it seems that in the imperial period *bon* was not the name for Tibetan non-Buddhist religion in general. Given the strong association of *bon* with funerary rituals right through the tenth century, I suspect that the non-appearance of the term here has more to do with the fact that Khri strong lde brtsan was not engaging in a specific criticism of non-Buddhist funerary rituals.

Would it be correct then, to suggest that *chos* was the name of the old religion of Tibet, before the Buddhists appropriated it to translate Sanskrit *dharma*? I suspect not. The question of the name of Tibet’s ‘ancient religion’ was treated to a long discussion by Ariane Macdonald, in which she settled on the term *gtsug lag* (or just *gtsug* alone) (Macdonald 1971). This was convincingly disputed by Rolf Stein, whose analysis of many sources not used by Macdonald led him to reject the idea that *gtsug* was the name

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“old religion” against the “Buddha’s religion” (much of the text being an explanation of the latter). Others have suggested that this rhetoric had a political element, and was in part directed against those members of the aristocracy who were opposed to the ascension of Khri strong lde brtsan and were associated with the anti-Buddhist movements of the earlier eighth century. Of course, in other imperial pillar edicts, like the Samye pillar, the *lha* are invoked (*gsol*) as witnesses; but the critique in the edict we are looking at here is directed against the elevation of the invocation of the deities to a position superior to Buddhism – the same elevation that the author of IOL Tib J 1746 protests against. In any case, the main point I want to make here is that *chos*, as the name of the old religion, does not refer to specific rituals, but a *complex* of many kinds of ritual practice (*cho ga*) and by association, beliefs in their efficacy.

for the ancient religion (Stein 1985: 96 and the English translation in Stein 2010: 136). Stein also criticized Erik Haarh's suggestion that *chos* could fill this role. Haarh had written that "chos is an integral idea of the Tibetan royalty, being the religious law entrusted to the sacerdotal class" (Haarh 1969: 447 note 6). Yet the few sources in which *chos* appears outside of a Buddhist context — often in the form *chos (lugs) bzang (po)* — do not justify reading it in this way.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, in the sources reviewed above, where *chos* is clearly being used to refer to a complex of ritual practice and belief, there is a clear link to the cluster of meanings around the Sanskrit *dharma* already cited from Monier-Williams: "usage, practice, customary observance or prescribed conduct, duty." It might well be better, as Stein suggested, to put aside the quest for the name of the pre-Buddhist religion. Let us consider the following scenario instead:- The various ritual practices and associated beliefs that existed in Tibet before the advent of Buddhism were not conceptualized as a unit and referred to by a single term at the time. It was only when the Buddhists began to propagate their religion in Tibet, and compose polemics against competing practices and beliefs that it became possible to conceive of them as a whole and lump them together under a single name. That name, *chos*, originated in the Tibetan cultural milieu but by the time the Buddhists were using it in this way it was strongly associated with the meanings of the Sanskrit term *dharma*. I am not suggesting that Buddhist polemics like IOL Tib J 1746 provide a fair, or even very accurate, representation of the non-Buddhist beliefs and practices that existed during the imperial period. But, like the edict of Khri srong lde brtsan, they are examples of the way early Tibetan Buddhists created a non-Buddhist 'other' in their polemical literature, and an example of the fact that the word chosen to conceptualize these beliefs and practices as an entity was not *bon*, but *chos*.

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<sup>21</sup> In these non-Buddhist documents, the term *chos (lugs) bzang (po)* appears to have more to do with good governance than with the rituals of priests (not that these can be firmly separated). See for example the Lhasa Treaty Pillar (East face, l.20; see Richardson 1985: 110–111), and the tomb inscription of Khri lde srong brtsan (l.2; see Richardson 1985: 86–87); and among the Dunhuang manuscripts, see for example the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (Pelliot tibétain 1287, ll.354, 358, 366, 451), and one of the narratives of "the age of decline" (IOL Tib J 735, ll.7, 20). Many translations of these early documents have resorted to the phrase 'good religion' when translating *chos (lugs) bzang (po)*, but is problematic. Brandon Dotson's choice of the term 'custom' seems a better policy (Dotson 2007: 5–6, citing Stein 1985). Of course, that fact that at some point the Tibet word *chos* was chosen to translate Sanskrit *dharma* does suggest that some conceptual resemblance was perceived between the two words; however, we should assess these apparently pre-Buddhist usages of *chos* on their own terms.

## Ritual ephemera: imperial-period Bonpos and other ritualists

By contrast with the term *chos*, references to *bon* in the Dunhuang manuscripts, in accounts both sympathetic and critical, can always be linked to the practice of specific rituals, and *bon po* to the officiants of these rituals. So, though there is no historical justification for using the word *bon* to refer to the complex of non-Buddhist ritual practices and beliefs before and during the Tibetan imperial period, I certainly do not want to imply that we should not be using the term *bon* at all when talking about this period. As mentioned above, some scholars have argued for a thoroughly sceptical approach to the manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave – the source of most of our earliest material containing the term *bon*. This would make even those references to *bon* and *bon po* in ritual narratives like the funerary text Pelliot tibétain 1042 open to being seen as productions of the tenth century and no earlier.<sup>22</sup>

With that in mind, I will leave the Dunhuang manuscripts to one side, and examine here a few wooden documents found by Aurel Stein in the Lop Nor desert.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the Dunhuang cave documents, we can be quite confident that these are products of the Tibetan imperium, as the military fort where they were found, now known as Miran, was lost by the Tibetans in the collapse of the Tibetan empire.<sup>24</sup> The documents date from the Tibetan occupation of Miran (mid-8th to mid-9th century). Thus they are more firmly dateable than any of the Dunhuang manuscripts that employ the term *bon* (even IOL Tib J 1746). Although some woodslips were transliterated and roughly translated by F.W. Thomas some sixty years ago, their relevance to non-Buddhist religious practice in imperial-period Tibet has not yet been fully investigated.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> In addition, a new collection of sources for non-Buddhist ritual practices and narratives, the manuscripts from the Dga' thang stūpa, seem to date from the tenth century at the earliest (see Pa tshab 2007, Karmay 2009 and J.V. Bellezza 2010).

<sup>23</sup> See Stein (1921) for an account of the discovery of the Tibetan woodslips.

<sup>24</sup> The exact date of the fall of Miran is not known. Beckwith states that this place remained in Tibetan hands into the 850s, but then “passed out of the historian’s ken” (1985: 172). From the point of view of language and paleography, the woodslips studied here belong among the military documents that form the bulk of the collection, and this may be said to form part of the culture of imperial Tibet, even if their exact *terminus ad quem* is not known. On the general features and contents of the Tibetan woodslips, see Takeuchi (2004). Of course, these documents are from one particular corner of the empire; nevertheless, while they clearly represent local ritual events, correspondances with manuscripts from not only Dunhuang but Dga' thang in Central Tibet suggests that they belong to a wider realm of ritual practice.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas (1951) contains transliterations and translations of secular manuscripts from Dunhuang, Miran and Mazar Tagh. The ritual documents are treated in Chapter 6, ‘Government and Social Conditions’.

These documents also help us with another problem with the Dunhuang cave manuscripts which talk about *bon* – which is that they are liturgical (or perhaps we might say literary) affairs. As Brandon Dotson has written, regarding Pelliot tibétain 1285 and its description of *bon* and *gshen* as ritualists:

At the same time, this is a picture gleaned from liturgical descriptions of *bon* and *gshen*, and does not describe relationships obtaining between actual *bon* and *gshen* in a given place. It is rather an exemplar for members of the tradition to follow. (Dotson 2008: 56)

Dotson goes on to note that none of the Dunhuang ritual narratives contain any local information, such as who the officiants of the rituals were, or whether a local deity was the object of the ritual. By contrast, the woodslips are valuable sources because they are ephemeral documents of a local ritual events. They offer us a chance to see the uses of the term *bon* and *gshen* in operation, ‘on the ground’. The ritual events recorded in the woodslips include funerals, supplication of deities, divination and ransoming rituals. Only the records funerals and deity supplications mention *bon* or *gshen*, and it is not clear whether their absence from the records of divination is significant or not.<sup>26</sup>

Five woodslips were identified by Thomas as records of funeral rituals (nos. 82–87, cf. Thomas 1951: 389–391). They all share vocabulary, and seem to record the same type of ritual; there is certainly some overlap here with the funeral ritual narratives in the Dunhuang manuscripts. Thomas's translations are not very satisfactory, and it is perhaps for this reason that their importance for the study of early Tibetan ritual has not been recognised. In the woodslips, we find references to the guidance of the “mental principle” (here a very provisional translation of *thugs*) of the deceased to the correct level (*gral*), which we also see in the ritual narratives Pelliot tibétain 1068 and 1134. This seems to be the main purpose of the rituals recorded in these woodslips (see Figure 3).

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas (1951: 399–401) identified five woodslips as records of divination rituals. The modern pressmarks of these woodslips are: IOL Tib N 744 (M.I.xv.0016), IOL Tib N 137 (M.I.iii.7), IOL Tib N 255 (M.I.iv.79), IOL Tib N 189 (M.I.iv.35), IOL Tib N 161 (M.I.iv.3). Some of these refer to the same types of supernatural beings we have already seen: *yul sman*, *rtse sman* and *g.yang*. However, no ritual officiants, *bon po* or otherwise, are mentioned. Thomas suggested that the references to *sogs pa* at the beginning of two slips indicated a ritual of scapulimancy. Given the similar phrasing of the other slips, and the mention of sheep in one, it seems likely that they all refer to a similar kind of ritual. None mention *mo*, the dice divination that we see in the Dunhuang manuscripts like S.155 and Pelliot tibétain 1047 (both of which use the term *bon* as well).

The main element of the ritual practice seems to be a libation offering; the woodslips specify a precise number of spoonfuls (*yams*) of a sacred beverage (*skyems*) to be offered. This ceremony is referred to in passing in other manuscripts as the ‘beverage offering’ (*skyems gsol*), and a reference in the *Old Tibetan Annals* suggests that some form of the ritual dates back to the seventh century.<sup>27</sup> Funerary rituals involving libation were practised in Inner Asia and China from at least the second millennium BC; for example, oracle bones and grave goods from the Shang and early Zhou period indicate the practice of libation in sacrificial, especially funerary, rituals.<sup>28</sup>

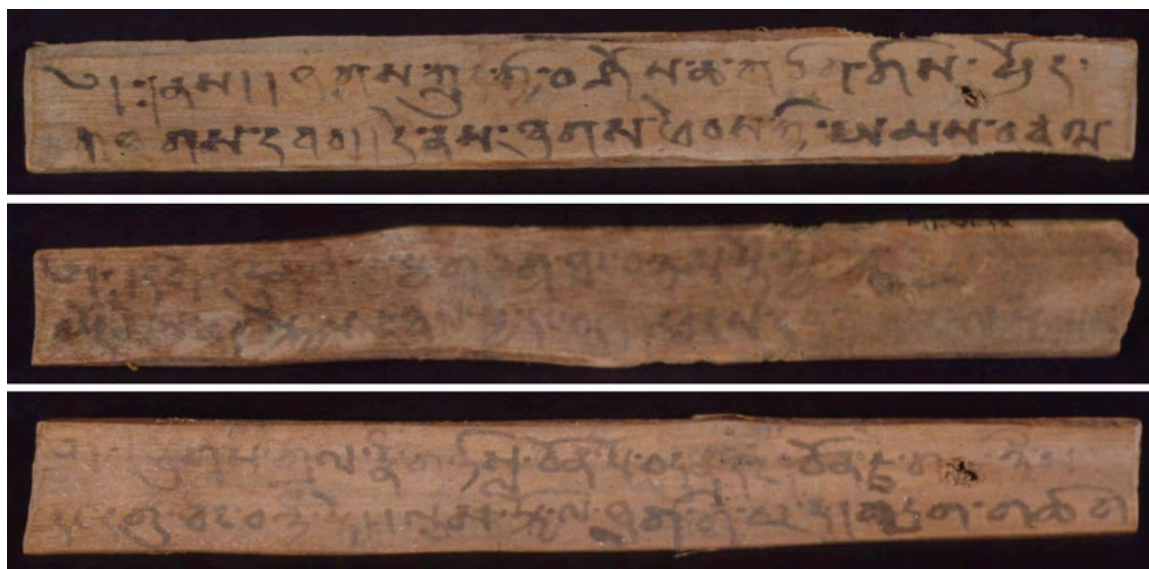


Figure 3 Three of Aurel Stein’s woodslips from the Lop Nor desert

The woodslips also repeatedly mention that the ritual space is delineated with wooden poles (*lcam skyo*), a feature also seen in Pelliot tibétain 1042.<sup>29</sup> The most interesting of the woodslip records of funeral ritual records, for our purposes, is the

<sup>27</sup> See for example Pelliot tibétain 1047. In the *Old Tibetan Annals*, the drink offering (*skyems gsol*) is made by an official in the year 682/3 (see Dotson 2009: 94). From a later period (probably the tenth century), one of the manuscripts from the Dga’ thang stūpa is a ritual narrative for the ritual of drinking beer known as the “golden libation” (*gser skyems*); see Bellezza (2010: 45–6). The *gser skyems* continues to the present day as a Buddhist ritual for protitiating protector deities.

<sup>28</sup> On Shang and Zhou ritual vessels for libation, see for example Linduff (1977) and Thote (2009). The archaeological record shows that libation was practised in ancient Siberian rituals (see Jacobson 1993), and from a later period we also have of libation in funerals practised by Mongol and Khitan aristocracies (many examples are cited in Baldick 2000). Thus funerary libation could be considered a part of what Christopher Beckwith has termed the *Central Eurasian Culture Complex* (see Beckwith 2009). However, since funerary libation was also part of the ritual system of ancient Greece and ancient India, we may have to settle for noting its ubiquity.

<sup>29</sup> See Pelliot tibétain 1042, l.113. My interpretation of the difficult term *lcam skyo* as ‘wooden poles’ is provisional. F.W. Thomas (1951: 389–390) translated the term as referring to a wife in mourning, but this does not seem right.

one detailing the involvement of *bon po* and *bon rje* in the ritual: IOL Tib N 330. This records the guidance of the mental principle of the deceased to “the second level” (*thugs gral rnam gnyis*).<sup>30</sup> In this particular ritual performance, the ritual space contained several officiants: seven *bon po* and two *bon rje* (the latter, perhaps, being the senior officiants of the ritual).<sup>31</sup> The same kind of ritual is represented in another woodslip; here the officiants of the ritual, who are referred to simply as “master and servant” (*dpon g.yog*) are said to have guided the mental principle of the deceased into the ritual space.<sup>32</sup>

A similar ritual was recorded in IOL Tib N 279, which has twenty-one Buddhist monks (*dge 'dun*) involved in the ritual.<sup>33</sup> This suggests that monks could participate in the same kind of funeral rituals associated with *bon po* and *sku gshen*. Such a possibility is supported by the ritual described in Pelliot tibétain 239, the ‘substitution’ (*bsngo ba*) in which Buddhist elements replaced traditional non-Buddhists elements of the ritual.<sup>34</sup> It is difficult to say whether in the particular ritual recorded on IOL Tib N 279 the monks were involved in the role held by the *bon po* and *bon rje* or were attending a ritual for a deceased member of their *sangha*. Either scenario would be intriguing.

Another ritual record, IOL Tib N 268 mentions the use of an effigy, the *glud* or *klud*.<sup>35</sup> The document seems to be incomplete, and we are missing the names of the officiants, but since the ransom object represents the mental principle (*thugs*) and the same term, *thugs klud*, appears in Pelliot tibétain 1042 as part of funerary procedure, it is likely that this is also a record of a funeral.<sup>36</sup> The many similarities between all of these brief records of funeral rituals and the long narrative of a royal funeral in Pelliot tibétain

<sup>30</sup> The term *thugs gral* also appears in IOL Tib J 562, which is discussed below.

<sup>31</sup> IOL Tib N 330 (M.I.vii.55): \$:/[th]ugs gral rnam gnyis la bon po bdun dang/ bon rje gnyis dang dgu thang bnyam ste// lcam skyo la thug gi bar du/ gdug gchig la myi chig kyang drug thul gyi rab las skyogs yams bcu bchu stsald pa'i sdom/ skyems thul gsum// (Thomas 1951: 390).

<sup>32</sup> IOL Tib N 283: \$:/dro chos phan chad/ btol gyi myi 'dus gyi lcam skyo la thugs pa tshun chad chus pa dpon g.yog gis 'dren pa'i// (see Thomas 1953: 389–90).

<sup>33</sup> IOL Tib N 279 (M.I.vi.12): \$:/dge 'dun nyi shu rtsa gcig thang bnyam ste myi gchig ... bsdoms nad skyems thul phyed dang bzhi/ phangs dbu [thus] la skyems ... cad zhal ta pa stong rims myi shu rtsa bzhi// thang bnyam ste/ myi cig kyang dru[-] yams bcu bcu gsol ba/ bsdoms na/ <thu> sky[e]ms phral brgya (see also Thomas 1951: 391).

<sup>34</sup> This text was analysed by Rolf Stein (1970). See also Imaeda 1981 and Ishikawa 2012. The same text is also found in the fragmentary manuscript IOL Tib J 504 and 562. Note that in these manuscripts the term *bon* only appears once, in the phrase *bon yas 'dod smrang*.

<sup>35</sup> IOL Tib N 268 (M.I.vi.2.a): \$:/nas// thugs klud kyi bshos cha gcig gis srod <g> thugs dbab// de nas thugs phebs kyi yams btsal te/ gdugs tshod nar ma dang/ nas/ stsang nan yams gsum gs[o]/nyam pag yams gchig btsugs nas/ gor bu yal sar drangs te g.yal spyi nas// do ma'i cho smos te 'jol (see also Thomas 1951: 392.)

<sup>36</sup> Dotson (2008: 63) discusses these funerary and ransoming rituals as “complementary technologies,” with reference to Pelliot tibétain 1042. A detailed narrative account incorporating the ransom ritual appears in IOL Tib J 734.

1042 helps us to situate these wooden documents within a ritual tradition exemplified by that narrative.<sup>37</sup>

The presence of many of the terms found in these wooden documents also indicates that Pelliot tibétain 1042 contains imperial-period material. Michael Walter has argued that this manuscript should be assigned to the post-imperial period, but since he did not make the linguistic or orthographic reasons for this assertion explicit, the argument remains to be settled. The wooden documents from Miran certainly demonstrate that Pelliot tibétain 1042 is closely related to the actual practice of funerary rituals during the imperial period. This seems a more satisfactory view of the matter than Walter's conclusion that Pelliot tibétain 1042 is simply a "unique and highly unusual text."<sup>38</sup> When we place Pelliot tibétain 1042 in dialogue with the wooden ritual ephemera from the deserts west of Dunhuang, it seems plausible that the narrative of the royal funeral rituals found in the former served as the mythical background for the individual ritual events represented by the latter. Given the evidence we have seen of a thriving ritual funerary tradition existing in the first half of the ninth century, Pelliot tibétain 1042 should be regarded as relevant to actual ritual practice.

\* \* \*

Let us now look briefly at the ritual ephemera relating to the supplication of deities. As we saw in the previous section, Buddhist authors of the imperial period who criticized non-Buddhist practices paid special attention to the ritual propitiation of deities, and the belief that this would have positive effects, either in this life or the next. Three of the woodslips are records of just such rituals. Two of these, unlike any other wooden documents, are four-sided sticks, with one end sharpened to a point (Figure 4). Each of the four sides has been written upon, in a continuous text which runs across the four sides of the stick.

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<sup>37</sup> Pelliot tibétain 1042 is associated with Pelliot tibétain 1039 and 1040. In Pelliot tibétain 1042 we have multiple references to *bon po* performing these rituals (and only one to *bon per se*).

<sup>38</sup> Walter (2010: 193); the general discussion of Pelliot tibétain 1042 is on pp.192–195. Elsewhere (p.296), Walter is content to state that Pelliot tibétain 1042 "is not Imperial-period." See also Henk Blezer's (2008: 432) more cautious assertion that Pelliot tibétain 1042 has a "relatively unique character" (which it shares with Pelliot tibétain 239 as well as IOL Tib J 504 and 562).





Figure 4 IOL Tib N 255

One of these sticks (IOL Tib N 255) records a ritual directed towards local deities designated *yul lha yul bdag*, a construction that also appears in Pelliot tibétain 1042. The ritual is also addressed to the spirits known as *sman*. The ritual officiants include the *zhal ta pa* and *sku gshen*, as well as a *lha bon po* – the *lha* prefix presumably indicating a specific role in propitiating deities.<sup>39</sup> The term *lha bon* (lacking the *-po* nominalizer) also appears in the *Old Tibetan Chronicle* (Pelliot tibétain 1287, ll.185–6) and a number of times in IOL Tib J 735 (a narrative of ‘the age of decline’), where it is one among several types of *bon* (see l.228) – making it clear that *lha* is a qualifier here, signifying a special type of *bon* or *bon po*. It seems that the role of *bon po* was specifically associated with funerary rites (suggesting that this was its origin), with the officiants of other forms of ritual were specified with adjectives like *lha*.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> IOL Tib N 255 (M.I.iv.121): \$//yul lha yul bdag dang/ sman gsol ba'i zhal ta pa/ sku gshen las myi[ng] b[sgrom] pa/ gy-d [-] zhal ta pa/ gsas chung lha bon po/ blo co [com] [rno]/ -m pos sug zungs/ la tong sprul sug gzungs/ (see also Thomas 1951: 395.)

<sup>40</sup> In the canonical translation the *Saṅghāṭa-sūtra*, we find the term *lha bon po* used to translate the Buddhist Sanskrit term *devapālaka*. Like most sūtras in the Tibetan canon, the translation dates to the latter half of the eighth century, although it was subsequently revised. In the sūtra, the *devapālaka* is a kind of priest who performs human and animal sacrifices to evoke the favour of a god; in sūtra's story, the *devapālaka* does this service for parents who want to save the life of their child (who dies despite the ritual being carried out). There is certainly some linguistic correspondence between *lha bon po* and *devapālaka*. Perhaps the Tibetan translators also saw an analogy between the

Another important revelation from IOL Tib N 255 is that the *lha bon po* and *sku gshen* worked together in certain rituals. This agrees with Brandon Dotson's reading of the ritual narrative text in IOL Tib J 1285, which had previously been read as evidence for rivalry between *bon po* and *gshen* (Dotson 2008). It is not clear from this ritual stick whether the *lha bon po* and *sku gshen* had different functions within the ritual. But we do have two more records of deity supplications, one in which there is a *lha bon po* but not *sku gshen* (IOL Tib N 210) and other in which there is a *sku gshen* but not *lha bon po*.

IOL Tib N 210 is another four-sided stick recording a ritual for a *rtse bla*, *rtse sman* and *g.yang*. The ritual officiants are a *lha bon po* and *zhal ta pa*. Though the text is difficult to decipher, it looks like we also have the personal names of the two people performing these roles.<sup>41</sup> In the third document of a deity supplication ritual we have a clearer record of the personal names, as well as the roles, of the officiants. This is IOL Tib N 873, which is a rectangular slip, rather than a pointed stick.<sup>42</sup> The ritual is directed towards a *yul lha yul bdag* and a *sman*. Two different roles are mentioned: one *zhal ta pa* and one *sku gshen*. Following this we have the term *dpon yog* (i.e. *dpon g.yog*), 'master and servant', suggesting a superior and inferior rank.<sup>43</sup> The two names, scribbled less carefully on the back of the slip, are a Blon Man gzigs and a Blon Mdo bzang. The fact that both people are identified with the official rank of *blon* suggests that the roles of *zhal ta pa* and *sku gshen* (and by extension, *bon po*) need not have been vocational, but rather roles that could be adopted when appropriate in order to carry out specific rituals.<sup>44</sup>

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activities of the sūtra's *devapālaka* and the *lha bon po* of Tibet. This use of *lha bon po* to translate *devapālaka* in the *Saṅghāṭa-sūtra* was mentioned in passing by Bailey (1966: 520). The discovery of the sūtra among the Gilgit finds confirms the existence of a Sanskrit version around the time of the sūtra's translation into Tibetan. And at the other end of the chronological spectrum, it is worth noting that *lha bon* is still used to refer to ritual specialists in the Himalayan areas at the fringes of the Tibetan cultural area. See for example Ramble (2009: 198).

<sup>41</sup> IOL Tib N 210 (M.I.iv.60): \$//rtse bla [rtse] sman dang g.yang gsol ba'i zhal ta pa dpon g.yog tu bskos pa/ gyab stag rta[n] zhal ta pa/ ya sto[ng] [r]an lha bon po/ my[i] mth[o]ng mngon pa/ gsas la brtsan [phar] ['dzu']// my[e]s kong phyag tshang dro brtsan sug zungs/ rtse bla rtse sman dang dang g.yang gu dang sna tsho[gs] ... (see also Thomas 1951: 394.)

<sup>42</sup> IOL Tib N 873 (M.I.xxvii.15): \$:/yul lha yul bdag dang sman gsol ba'i zhal ta pa/ dang sku gshen dpon yog/ /:/blon/ man gzigs blon mdo bzang (see also Thomas 1951: 395.)

<sup>43</sup> The term *zhal ta pa* appears frequently (along with *sku gshen*) in Pelliot tibétain 1042, where Lalou translates this as 'les chambellans'. F.W. Thomas translates it as 'administrant'. It seems to refer to a junior participant in the ritual.

<sup>44</sup> Another possibility is that the two figures on the woodslip are the patrons of the ritual, rather than the officiants. In any case, both seem to have been active in the region, as we see the same names in other manuscripts from Miran and Mazar Tagh. A seal with the same name, and the emblem of a horse and rider, is A Blon Mdo bzang is named in Or.15000/228, a letter from Mazar Tagh, with faint seal. A Blon mang gzigs is mentioned Or.8212/1900, a fragment from Mazar Tagh; Or.15000/426, a contract, with four round seals, from Miran; and Or.15000/467, an official record from Miran in which he is one of the convokers of a conference in the Turkic regions (Dru gu yul).

To sum up, these wooden documents give us the best proof we could hope for that *bon po*, *sku gshen*, *zhal ta pa* and other related terms were ritual roles taken on by real people involved in funerary rites, local deity supplication, and ransom rituals in the Tibetan imperial period. The ritual ephemera from Miran serve as a valuable complement to the ritual narratives and liturgies in the Dunhuang manuscripts. These are local rituals directed towards local concerns like funerals and local deities like the *yul lha*. They are not directed towards the *btsan po*, the protection of the empire, or any other central concern. As ephemera of specific local ritual events, the woodslips support Dotson's view that "local rituals, such as ransom rites, preceded and informed their elaboration on a larger scale" (Dotson 2008: 65).<sup>45</sup> Along with Dotson, I do not think we need not argue about whether the local rituals or the narratives came first. These ritual ephemera complement the centralizing ritual narratives. We can see that accounts of royal funerals like Pelliot tibétain 1042, and narratives of healing and ransom rituals like Pelliot tibétain 1285 could have developed out of local ritual practices, and subsequently have provided a ritual narrative and mythological context for these local rituals.

If we see the relationship between the local ritual events and the ritual narratives in this way, we do not need to identify descriptions of non-Buddhist ritual practices in Tibet with an 'imperial' or 'royal' religion, as some influential previous studies have done.<sup>46</sup> While rituals surely had their place in the Tibetan court, it seems better to view Tibetan non-Buddhist ritual practices *in general* as existing across the Tibetan cultural area, not as expressions of a central state religion, but as local rituals linked by oral traditions. It might be useful to consider the ritual narratives that have survived in the Dunhuang cave (and the Dga' thang stūpa) in the light of Lori Honko's definition of 'tradition':

To me *tradition* primarily refers to materials only, to an unsystematic array of cultural elements that have been made available to particular social group in different times and contexts. Tradition would thus look like a store, only some parts of which are in use at any given time ... Tradition, in other words,

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<sup>45</sup> On the same page, Dotson accepts that it is also possible to view the local traditions as derivative of the imperial tradition, but prefers to see this as secondary. He prefers to see the imperial religion as 'local religion plus' – 'where regional and local ritual traditions and territorial cults are expanded and adapted for imperial use, and only then filter back down to a local level'.

<sup>46</sup> The most influential efforts in this regard are probably Haarh (1969) and Macdonald (1971). I am here agreeing again with Brandon Dotson who says that this tendency 'must be resisted' (Dotson 2008: 67).

would denote the cultural potential or resource, not the actual culture of the group. (Honko 1996: 19)

In Honko's terminology, *tradition* refers to the materials available (narrative accounts, ritual techniques, and so on), whereas *culture* signifies an ordering of the mass of traditional material into an integrated and functional whole, a system. In this sense, when we study the early Tibetan ritual materials, we are clearly dealing with a tradition. At the same time, we are struggling to understand the cultures (plural) that made use of these traditional materials. Thus I would suggest we should not look for an essence behind the term *bon* (or other terms from the pre-Buddhist religion), but rather for family resemblances within the material that is available to us. In this way we are free to talk about a 'tradition', 'culture', or even 'religion' without suggesting something possessing a centre (such as at the imperial court) or an essence (such as specific ritual narratives).

### **'The Bonpos of Tibet': Buddhist critiques of funerary rituals**

The prevalence of the funeral rituals practised in the Tibetan imperial period is reflected in the number of Buddhist critiques of them found among the Dunhuang manuscripts. The most extensive of these is Pelliot tibétain 239. The author of this text displays an in-depth knowledge of the terminology and mechanics of Tibetan funerary rituals, and suggests how they may be turned into acceptable Buddhist rituals through the substitution of certain parts of the ritual with Buddhist elements. However, the text does not mention the *bon po* or *sku gshen* which we saw in the wooden documents from Miran.<sup>47</sup> I will briefly introduce here two more Buddhist critiques, which have not previously been discussed, and which do target the *bon po* specifically, thus offering us further insight into the uses of the terms *bon* and *bon po*. Unfortunately, these manuscripts are not so clearly dateable as those discussed above, so we cannot necessarily read them as evidence for the situation during the Tibetan imperial period.

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<sup>47</sup> The text is on the recto only, the verso containing the *Lha yul du lam bstan pa*. See Stein 1970, Imaeda 1981, Chu 1989 and Ishikara 2012. We find only one use of the term *bon* in Pelliot tibétain 239, which is *bon yas* at r.7, l.5.

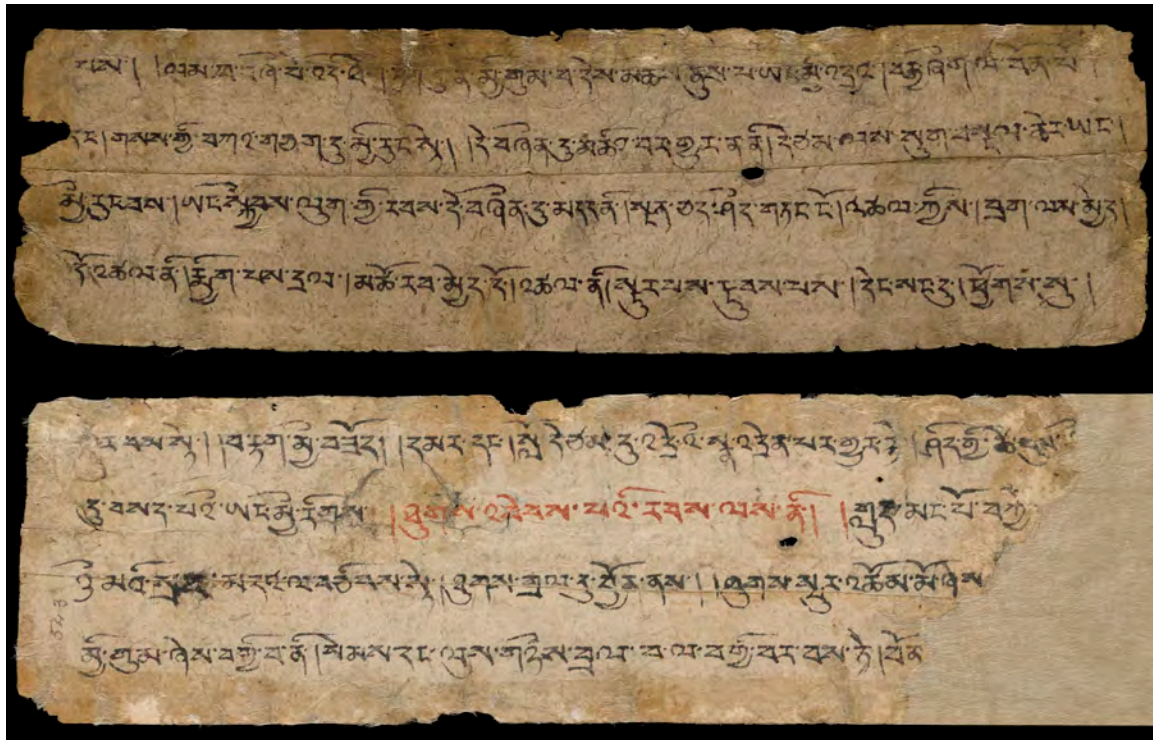


Figure 5 IOL Tib J 489 and 562

The first critique is in fact two manuscripts which were previously thought to be unconnected, IOL Tib J 489 and 562 (Figure 5). Placing them together, it is clear that they are two panels of a single original concertina manuscript.<sup>48</sup> The text on one side is a Buddhist prayer, and on the other we have a description and criticism of funerary rituals. One line is written in red, which appears to be the common practice of rubricating the name of a cited text, suggesting that what follows is a citation, or a paraphrase, of a non-Buddhist ritual text. The name of the text or tradition cited is *thugs bebs pa'i rabs*, that is, the ritual for the descent of the mental principle of the deceased. Other references in the text suggest that we are dealing with the ritual of guiding the mental principle towards the ideal “level” (*gral*) that we saw in the wooden ritual records from Miran. This manuscript also provides us with confirmation of the presence within such rituals of the sheep as a spirit guide (*skyibs lugs*), and the use of ransom effigies (*glud*). Most importantly, we have a reference to the presence of the *bon*

<sup>48</sup> Both manuscripts were catalogued in Dalton and van Schaik (2006); however, we did not recognise that they were from the same original manuscript at that time. The discoloration of IOL Tib J 489, and the conservation of the more damaged IOL Tib J 562 somewhat disguise this relation. Furthermore, because of the way they have been catalogued, it is the verso of the former that matches the recto of the latter. The fact that they are from the same manuscript is evidence in their dimensions, in the presence of a string hole right of centre in both, and in the similarity of handwriting and the text’s *mise en page*.

po as officiant. The similarities between this text and the terminology of the wooden ritual documents from Miran suggests that the author was dealing with the living tradition represented by those rituals.<sup>49</sup>

The second of these fragmentary critiques offers an even more revealing use of the terms *bon* and *bon po*. This fragment, which has the number Or.8210/S.12243, is sewn onto another piece of paper, which contains an incomplete Buddhist *sādhana* (Figure 6). Both pieces of paper are heavily worn, and the one containing the funerary critique has darkened with use, so much so that parts can only be read with the help of infrared photography. Such heavy use, and the fact that the manuscript as we have it has been repurposed, suggests that it dates from some time before the Dunhuang cave was closed at the beginning of the eleventh century. The writing style of this fragment, which is closest to the official cursive found in the imperial period documents, suggests a ninth-century date, though this cannot be confirmed.

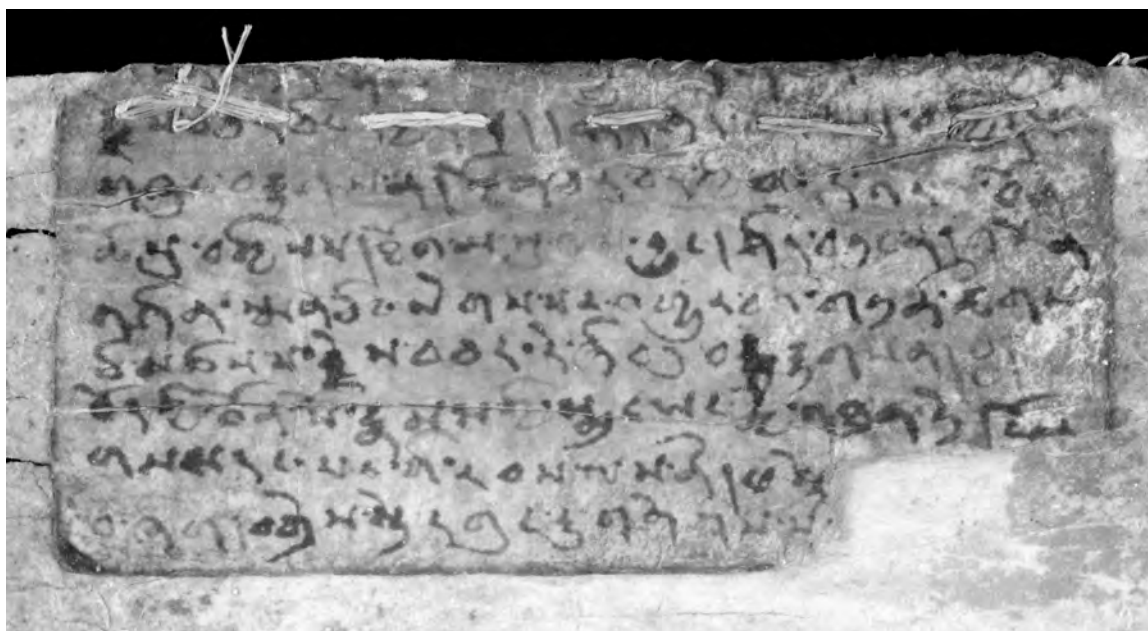


Figure 6 Or.8210/S.12243

<sup>49</sup> IOL Tib J 489 verso: ... pas// lam kha bzhi po 'di thog [t]ag tu ni myi gum ba des mchis nus pa yang myi 'dra/ brgya zhig la bon po/ dang/ gsas gyi bka' gcag du myi rung ste// de bzhi du mchi' bar gyur na ni/ de tsam las sdug bsngal cher yang/ myi rung bas/ yang skyibs lug gyi rabs de bzhi du mdad ni/ sngan cad shid gtang ngo/ 'tshal kyis/ brag lam myed/ do 'tshal ni/ rmig pas dral/ mtsho rab myed do/ 'tshal ni/ sdur pas rngubs pas/ deng sang du/ phyogs su IOL Tib J 562 recto: [-]r bam ste// brtag myi bzod// dmar dang/ slo de tsam du 'dre'i sna 'dren par gyur ste/ shid gyi tshe dus shi[d] [...] du bsad pa'i yang myi rigs// thugs 'bebs pa'i rabs las ni// glud mang po bkye [...] nyi ma'i srang mda' la bcibs ste/ thugs gral du byon nas// thugs spur tshom mo zhes [...] myi gum zhes bgyi ba no/ sems dang lus gnyis bral ba la bgyi bar bas te/ bon [...]

The fragment begins with a jargon-heavy description of the treatment of a corpse in the funerary tradition. This is clearly a process of embalming, although the details are not clear. One reading would be this: the corpse is eviscerated (*rjes bcad*) and drained of blood (*dpyad*); then after some lapse of time, the corpse is entombed after being anointed with materia medica (*sman*) and beautified (*legs par 'gyur*). This description seems somewhat similar to the treatment of the corpse in royal rituals as told in Pelliot tibétain 1042 and the *Old Tibetan Chronicle*.

In any case, what is striking here is the statement: “In the past, Tibetan interment was practised according to the *bon* religion” (*sngon cad bod kyi mdad 'do la bon chosu bgyis pa/ Or.8210/S.12243*). Here we see again that word *chos*, used so freely in the missionary text in IOL Tib J 1746, but now married to the word *bon*. What are we to make of this? As we have seen, the ritual texts themselves do not seem to use the word *bon* to refer to a tradition that includes and extends beyond the rituals they themselves present. Yet here, in S.12243, *bon* seems to have that extended significance, as a term covering funerary rituals in general. In placing *bon* in apposition to *chos* in this way, the author of this text suggests that *bon* is a form of *chos*. And as we saw above, for Buddhist writer, *chos* carries the meanings of *dharma*, as in a system of behaviour, observance, something believed to be right and good; perhaps, a religion.<sup>50</sup>

After giving a précis of the Tibetan funerary tradition, the author of the fragment states: “if one examines the justifications for this [practice] ... even the ritual narratives of the *bon po* of Tibet are not in agreement” (*de nyid bcu ba brtags na/ bod kyi bon po rnams kyi smrang yang myl 'thun te/ Or.8210/S.12243*). On the face of it, this appears to be a criticism of the multifarious nature of the ritual narratives (*smrang*) that supported Tibet's non-Buddhist rituals. Judging from the few of these narratives that have survived in the Dunhuang cave and the Dga' thang stūpa, these narratives are not meant to support and agree with each other. They address specific rituals and seem to derive from a folkloric context without any overarching, organizing metanarrative. The Buddhist author is applying an expectation of coherence – of the desirability of a metanarrative – that we do not see in the ritual texts themselves.

And why does the author specify the *bon po* (plural) of Tibet? What other *bon po* could there be? In fact, coming from a Buddhist author, the statement is perhaps not so unlikely. Translators of Chinese apocryphal sutras, working in the late eighth and early ninth century, used *bon po* to translate general Chinese terms for heretical teachers

<sup>50</sup> In contemporary Bhutan, non-Buddhist rituals are referred to by the same words, *bon chos* (personal communication, Karma Phuntsho).



such as *xieshi* 邪師.<sup>51</sup> Among the Dunhuang manuscripts there is a Tibeto-Chinese phrasebook (Or.8210/S.1000 and S.2736) which glosses *bon po* with *shi kong* (*shigong* 師公), ‘sorcerer’ (cf. Thomas & Giles 1948). These translation choices vastly extended the range of the term *bon po* to cover all non-Buddhist priests in settings outside of Tibet itself. In the context of such a generalized significance, the phrase “*bon po* of Tibet” becomes meaningful. This generalized use of *bon po* suggests the same trend that we see in the fragmentary polemic in S.12243, in which the *bon po* has become the exemplar of the non-Buddhist ritualist. This then sets the scene for the later appropriation of the term by the emergent Bonpo tradition from the eleventh century onwards.

## Conclusion

During the rise of Buddhism in Tibet in the eighth century, Buddhists composed critiques of non-Buddhist rituals and beliefs which, perhaps for the first time, identified these beliefs as a unified whole, a way of thought and action, an alternative form of *dharma* (*chos*). General Buddhist critiques like IOL Tib J 1746 identify certain key features of this non-Buddhist *chos* – a belief in the agency of spiritual beings, and the need for certain kinds of ritual practice to ensure that they are kept happy. Another genre of Buddhist polemic targeted funerary rituals in particular. Among these polemics we find detailed descriptions of these rituals, which are said to include the practice of libation, the use of effigies, and the guidance of the mental aspect of the deceased. This genre of polemic targeted the figure of the *bon po* in particular as the exemplar of the non-Buddhist ritualist.

Previously neglected sources for the actual practice of non-Buddhist rituals in imperial Tibet, the wooden slips from the Tibetan military settlement at Miran, show that during this period the *bon po* was one among several types of ritualist specializing in funerals and the invocation of deities for various purposes. Other ritual roles included the *lha bon po*, the *sku gshen* and the *zhal ta pa*. The records of actual funerary rituals in these documents show many of the same practices that are described in the

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<sup>51</sup> These sources were discussed by Rolf Stein (1983), who discussed the use of *bon po* in the *Bayang jing* 八陽經, as mentioned earlier. Recently, Jacob Dalton has recently mentioned the Buddhist use of *bon* in texts like the *Bayang jing* 八陽經 as “a blanket pejorative to refer to non-Buddhist medicine men, exorcists, and prognosticators of all sorts” (2011: 58).



Buddhist polemics, and there is also considerable overlap with the ritual narratives found in the Dunhuang and Dga' thang manuscripts.

I would suggest that the general impression we gain from bringing these sources together is that the early Buddhist discussions of non-Buddhist rituals have a totalizing approach, in contrast to the ritual records themselves, and the variety of ritual narratives that stand beside them. The ritual records are *distributed* in that they represent specific local ritual events. The ritual narratives are *diverse* in that they represent a variety of traditions without an over-arching interpretative scheme. It is Buddhism, an imported metanarrative, that brings together this variety of Tibetan rituals and beliefs as an entity that can be identified, named and discussed.

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# Tibetan Inscriptions on Ancient silver and gold Vessels and Artefacts

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Prior to 1970, only two ancient silver artefacts discovered in Lhasa were known to scholars. These objects, each of exceptional quality and refined workmanship, were the sole tangible artefacts reflecting literary and historical records from the period of the Spu rgyal dynasty (7th- mid-9th century). Records from this time repeatedly describe silver and gold objects from Tibet, many shaped like animals or birds.<sup>1</sup> The first of these earlier known artefacts, a Greco-Bactrian silver bowl decorated with fishes, trees and human figures, had been treasured as a family heirloom since generations by Lhasa aristocrats, and presented to Professor David Snellgrove after 1950 (Snellgrove & Richardson 1968: 50-51, 256; Denwood 1973: 121-127). The second, observed in-situ in Lhasa by Hugh Richardson, was described as "a round-bellied silver wine jar with a long neck surmounted by a stylized horse's head", had been re-dedicated in 1946 according to its inscription, and was "...reputed to go back to the times of the *chos rgyal*" (Richardson 1998[1963]: 228, 1977[1998]: 254).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, deploring the lack of such Tibetan artefacts, the Tang historian Edward Schafer wrote in 1963:

Though Iran may have been the ultimate source of the art of beating golden vessels and the ultimate inspiration of many of the designs worked on them by the artisans of the Tang, it appears that Tibet must also be given an important place among the nations whose craftsmen contributed to the culture of Tang. To judge by records of tribute and gifts from Tibet to Tang, which over and over again list large objects of gold, remarkable for their beauty and rarity and

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<sup>1</sup> A silver saddle, gold hair ornaments, a stone lion sculpture and some garments were found in caves near the Dulan tombs ca. 1930; these artefacts were first described, but not photographed, nor collected, by Filchner (1938: 102-103). In 1902-1906, Grünwedel made a line drawing of a mural painting in the Idikut Palace where ancient ewers and flasks, all probably manufactured in silver, were represented with Uighur aristocrats (cf. Grünwedel 1912: 334, fig. 665 and see below, figure 3)

<sup>2</sup> Richardson did not mention that the ewer was partially gilded (cf. Heller 2002, 2003).

excellent workmanship, the Tibetan goldsmiths were the wonder of the medieval world. Let us...hope that future archaeologists will discover actual examples of Tibetan or Tibetan-inspired Tang goldwork in the soil of China. (Schafer 1963: 253-254)

In the past twenty years, systematic archaeological investigations of Tibetan tombs and chance finds have yielded a range of jewellery, vessels and artefacts in gold and silver, both cast and *repoussé*, as well as silk textiles with similar design motifs. The workmanship of these artefacts spans across Central Asia from Sogdiana to Tibet to China, a reflection of the complex dynamics of extensive commercial and cultural exchange during the expansion of the Tibetan empire along the vast network of the Silk Routes. The easily portable nature of such artefacts renders their provenance virtually impossible to determine in the majority of cases. While their manufacture may have occurred in one region, they were easily transported and used in other regions, and offered as tribute in yet other regions still.<sup>3</sup>

Even so, during the Spu rgyal dynasty, Tibetan usage of such articles is documented in mural paintings at Dunhuang which portray the *btsan po* Tibetan Emperor raising a silver cup with small handle and lotus base towards one of his attendants, (see figure 1, detail of the *btsan po* and his silver cup, Dunhuang cave 159, ca. 800-825 C.E.). Other excavated painted coffin panels depict scenes of banquets where Tibetan women and men adorned with turquoise and gold jewelry, hold silver cups, ewers and platters (Tong & Wertmann 2010; Heller, in press). Lamellar armour is worn by warriors and horses painted on these coffins which also portray mounted archers aiming at their prey, their quivers and bow-cases visible on the flank of their horses as they engage in the ritual hunt of yak and deer.<sup>4</sup> Archaeological excavations of tombs of the Spu rgyal dynasty have revealed fragmentary silver sword handles as well

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<sup>3</sup> Due to repeated plunder of the tombs over time, it is problematic to establish accurate stratification of the tombs during the recent excavations; one must also bear in mind the long history of the commercial networks along the Silk Routes, and their modern version, i.e. the antiquities trade which account for the broad dispersal of artefacts.

<sup>4</sup> The leather backing of a segment of silver lamellar armour in the collection of Robert Tsao, Taipai, has been subjected to radiocarbon analysis, yielding a chronology of mid-seventh to mid-eighth century.. I thank Robert Tsao for communicating to me this radiocarbon calibration report and authorizing publication of this analysis by Rafter Radiocarbon Laboratory, National Isotope Centre, Institute of Geological and Nuclear Science, New Zealand 23.11.2006: Conventional radiocarbon age 1319 +/- 25 years; calibrated age in terms of confidence intervals:

2 sigma interval is 655 AD to 718 AD (1295 BP to 1232 BP, 74% of area)

plus 743 AD to 769 AD ( 1207 BP to 1181 BP, 19% of area)

1 sigma interval is 663 AD to 687 AC (1287 BP to 1263 BP, 47.3% of area).

as other Tibetan accoutrements for war or hunting such as armour and horse trappings made of iron, lacquered leather, silver and gold.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 1. Dunhuang cave 159, btsan po holding silver cup

We will study here a few examples of such artefacts in silver and gold - one gold cup, two silver cups, two platters, a flask, a belt buckle, a personal seal and a segment of

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<sup>5</sup> Xu Xinguo, former Director of Qinghai Archaeological Institute has published numerous articles describing the architecture of the mid-8th century tombs at Dulan, their excavations and artefacts, with meticulous drawings. See translations of his articles by Bruce Doar (1996) and Xu (2006). For photographs of the silver sword handle (width 4.6 cm x 2.2 thick) and parcel gilt-silver knife handle excavated near the principal tomb at Dulan, see *Tibetan Tombs at Dulan*, Beijing University and Qinghai Archeological Institute, 2004: 99 DRN M1:14 (plate 9) and 99 DRN M3: 6 (plate 23). Twenty-one segments (2.5 x 2.1 x 0.4 thick) of small hammered gold sheet rectangular plaques, probably for lamellar armour, were also excavated, of which similar artefacts are illustrated in *ibid* 2004: 99 DRNM3:1, 99 DRN M3:2 (plate 23).

a bow case - all of which bear inscriptions in Tibetan language.<sup>6</sup> The interpretation of these inscriptions remains problematic due to the paucity of examples. While four have been previously published, it is useful to re-assess their content in the light of subsequent research.<sup>7</sup> Comparisons with contemporaneous inscribed stone stele in central and western Tibet and Tibetan manuscripts from Dunhuang and Mazar Tagh indicate that the inscriptions on these silver and gold artefacts conform to the Old Tibetan conventions of punctuation and spelling as well as morphology of certain letters (cf. Dalton et al. 2007). It appears that the inscriptions consist primarily of names of people, some of whom may belong to clans named in the stone stele and manuscripts. The individuals' names are sometimes complemented by phrases indicative of the weight of the artefact as well as phrases which may relate to their functional usage in a funerary or ritual context.<sup>8</sup> In addition to the Tibetan names and words, sometimes the inscriptions comprise patterns of non-decorative lines and circles found on the base of the artefacts. Comparison with similar inscriptions on contemporaneous Sogdian silver bowls indicates that these marks may refer to the weight of the object.<sup>9</sup>

### The historical context.

Before examining these artefacts and their Tibetan inscriptions, a brief review of their historical context is warranted to understand how such objects were described in contemporaneous literary sources.

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that at present, very few archeological artefacts inscribed in Tibetan are known. In addition to the artefacts with inscriptions studied here, there are a few seal imprints among the Dunhuang and Mazar Tagh Tibetan manuscripts, but the actual seals have not been discovered. The repeated plunder of tombs over the centuries and the fragmentary nature of many artefacts may account for the lack of inscribed artefacts; were systematic, stratigraphic excavations to be undertaken, perhaps more inscribed artefacts would be recovered.

<sup>7</sup> For the inscription on the silver cup now in Cleveland Museum of Art see Czuma (1993), Carter (1998). For the platter in Miho Museum see Marshak (1996: 80-83); Heller (2002) for the Cleveland silver cup (fig 34); the silver cup of Metropolitan Museum (fig 42) and the vase now in the Pritzker collection (fig 35); for further research on this vase see Heller (2003: 55-64, figs. 16a-16d).

<sup>8</sup> Such as the inscription written on a textile which indicates its placement in a burial chamber ( *spur khang nang dzong*, "treasure of the chamber of the corpse". This silk samit textile is now conserved in the Abegg Foundation, Riggisberg, Switzerland (Heller 1998a).

<sup>9</sup> Characteristic inscriptions on Sogdian silver bowls include Sogdian personal names, for which no satisfactory etymology, as well as meaningful marks such as incised parallel lines which appear to indicate units of some kind of weight measure. This same system appears on the base of the silver platter now conserved in the Shumei Family collection, Miho Museum (see below). For explanation and illustration of this system of numbering, see, for example, the silver bowl now conserved in the Freer Gallery of Art (accession number F 1997.13) discussed by Marshak (1999: 103-110).



Prior to the recent excavations, our knowledge of Tibetan archaeological artefacts was essentially limited to literary accounts from Tibetan and Chinese historical records. It is helpful to examine these references in chronological order. The earliest source is *The Old Tibetan Annals*, a year-by-year account spanning ca. 650-764, a text composed largely contemporaneously with the events it describes (cf.. Dotson 2009: 10, 12-15, 74-75). In this invaluable historical resource, unfortunately, there is no narrative discussion of burial of artefacts; the mentions of gold and silver refer to descriptions of insignia of rank in the Tibetan administration. These ranks are elucidated thanks to Dotson's careful explanation, where turquoise rank highest, followed by gold, then *phra men* which Dotson interprets as "gold inlaid silver, silver-gold alloy", followed by silver, brass and copper (2009: 60-63, 259).<sup>10</sup> In the light of the artefacts examined here, we propose to understand the term *phra men* as "parcel gilt silver" i.e. gilded silver, silver on which gold has been applied to the surface. There are traces of gilding on the two silver platters and cup; and on the silver beaker or vase all the hybrid creatures are gilded. Two distinct processes of gilding have been identified in technical studies of similar artefacts.<sup>11</sup> The Sogdian craftsmen practiced the technique of gilding by cladding, the fusion of gold foil to the silver surface using mechanical pressure while the metal was heated without mercury. This technique has been documented on a gilt silver reliquary attributed to Sogdian workmanship, mid-8th century, which was excavated from the sacrificial horse trenches in front of the principal tomb at Dulan, Qinghai (Xu 1996: 45). The technique of fire-gilding (Tibetan: *tsha gser*), in which an amalgam of mercury and gold was applied to a clean silver surface and heated to remove the excess mercury (Meyers 1981: 150), was known in Tibet by the 9th century according to the Tibetan historian Padma dkar po (1527-1592).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Dotson (2009: 45) refers to the translation by Demiéville (1952[1987]: 284 note 2) who translated the third rank insignia according to the Chinese rank with the term "argent doré (vermeil)", although rendering the Tibetan equivalent rank as "joyau" (jewel). Vermeil is technically a thick coat of gold, yellow or white, applied to silver. The gilding on these early artefacts from Tibet is not necessarily as thick as vermeil, nor uniformly coating the entire object.

<sup>11</sup> Among the numerous studies by Paul Jett, Emeritus Head of Conservation and Scientific Research, Freer and Sackler Galleries, see his discussion on the evolution of gilding techniques in Jett (1992: 49-60).

<sup>12</sup> There are no ancient Tibetan literary descriptions of goldsmiths, but craftsmen work in gold since antiquity because it is the most malleable and ductile of all metals; a single gram can be beaten into a sheet of 1 square meter, or an ounce into 300 square feet. Gold leaf can be beaten thin enough to become transparent. Gold was applied to silver to enhance the beauty and value, but also as a practical means to hide tarnish. On smelting of gold in antiquity see Réunion des Musées Nationaux, *Le livre de l'Or*, Paris 1998. For the citation of Padma dkar po see Lo Bue (1981: 58, and pp. 52-58 on silver and gold).

The *Old Tibetan Chronicle* is also a contemporaneous historical narrative of the Spu rgyal dynasty. This text stipulates the use of gold spear tips in a unique strategy of assassination: the first emperor is killed in the haze of a battle where two hundred golden spear tips are affixed to the horns of one hundred oxen who stampede, thus raising an enormous cloud of dust in the midst of which the emperor is assassinated.<sup>13</sup> Thereupon, his corpse is placed inside a copper vessel, not vessels in silver or gold, and then immersed in a riverbed.<sup>14</sup> In the *Annals of the 'A zha*, the Tuyuhun kingdom in the vicinity of Lake Kokonor subjugated by the Tibetans in mid-7th century, according to their yearly records for the early 8th century, "upon the celebration of a great feast, the daughter of the lord of the 'A zha received 5 pieces of ancestral silver and great presents" (line 4: *pha 'babs dgnul lnga dang bya dga'* ... cf. Thomas, vol. 2, 1951: 8 and 10).<sup>15</sup> However there is no description of these ancestral silver objects.

While these three sources are the only extant historical sources (albeit incomplete) on Tibet composed during the Spu rgyal dynasty, the *Chronicle of Dbā' (Dbā' bzhed)* is a Tibetan royal narrative of the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet, a compilation in several versions, of which certain portions have been attributed to the 9th and 10th centuries (van Schaik & Iwao 2008; van Schaik & Doney 2009). One version describes a silver vase or beaker *dngul gyi bya bum*, which may be interpreted to mean "a silver vase shaped like a bird" (Wangdu & Diemberger 2000: 56 note 166), or possibly "a silver vase decorated with (designs of) bird(s)". A more recent version, the *Annotated Chronicle of Sba (Sba bzhed zhabs btags ma)* describes *dngul bya 'khum bu can*, as a 'silver bird' having/attached to a 'khum bu, which is an enigmatic term.<sup>16</sup> It may reflect scribal error. Perhaps, instead of *dngul bya 'khum bu can*, the reading should be rectified as

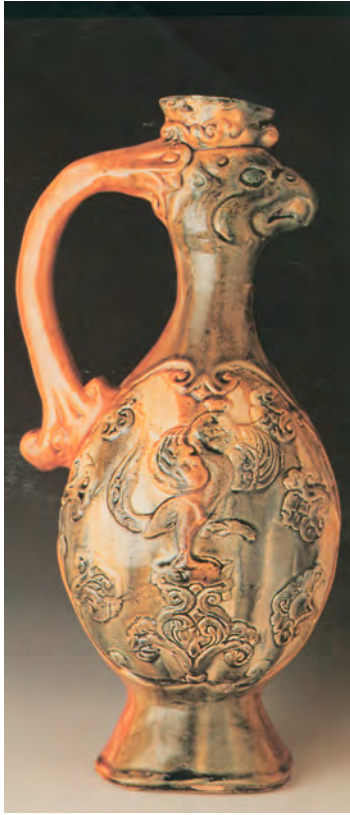
<sup>13</sup> Pelliot Tibétain 1287 (16) // 'ung nas lo gnam gyis glang po brgya'la/: gser gyi mdung rtse nyis brgya' rva la btags te / (Bacot et al. 1940: 124; Hill 2006: 92; Zeisler 2011: 105). See also the artefacts excavated near Nankartse, central Tibet which include a gold helmet finial, gold spear tips and four small horse plaques 4.4 x 2.4 cm made of beaten gold with granulation intentionally arranged to show bridle, saddle, and saddle trappings: Tibetan Cultural Relics Office/Shannan district, "Excavation of a tomb at Chajiagou in Nagarze, Tibet" *Kaogu* 2001/6: 45-47 and Heller (2003: 55-56, fig. 1). Horse plaques from Nankartse and fig. 2. Earrings from Nankartse.

<sup>14</sup> Later descriptions (14th century) instead relate that the corpse of a *btsan po* was placed in a great copper vessel filled with vermilion, subsequently coated with gold; smaller copper vessels were filled with gold dust. See Haarh (1969: 349-350).

<sup>15</sup> Thomas dated this account 635-648 C.E. however subsequent research (Uray 1978: 545-6) firmly dated this description to events of 706-714 C.E.

<sup>16</sup> See Wangdu & Diemberger (xiv-xv, 11-14) for discussion of dating the different versions of this account. In the *Sba bzhed*, this passage is also found: *sku gsung thugs kyi rten zhengs su gsol ba/ sku'i rten bcom ldan 'das khar sar pa ni gsungs gi rten khri phyed gsum stong ba/ thugs kyi rten dngul bya 'khum bu can/ nye gnas kha phye (>che) utpa las/ dngul gyi byams pa bzhegs nas dngul dus kyi mchod pa btsugs/* (Stein 1961: 78).

*ngul bya bum bu can*, "a silver bird attached to a small water pot".<sup>17</sup> The *Sba bzhed* also refers to an auspicious vase made of gold, without description of its shape (*bkra shis kyi bum pa gser las byas pa gcig*/ *Sba bzhed* 1961: 24).



While the precise interpretation of these two early Tibetan expressions in the *Sba bzhed* remains elusive, to better understand the context of decorations on the inscribed silver and gold artefacts, two roughly contemporary examples help to elucidate potential meanings: (fig 2, left) a small Chinese ceramic pitcher with a phoenix head spout and a standing phoenix design on the body of the pitcher, attributed to the Tang period and (fig 3) a grandiose round-bellied ewer with elongated neck and a bird head finial used as a ceremonial vessel, illustrated in a line drawing by German archeologist Alfred Grünwedel of the ca. 9th century mural painting he observed in the Uighur palace at Gaochang (Turfan). This ewer was possibly manufactured in silver as a ceramic vessel would be far too heavy to lift in this size.

In contrast with the sparse and laconic descriptions of these early Tibetan historical sources, two versions of the *Tang Annals* (compiled mid-10th-mid 11th century, cf. Horlemann, in press), repeatedly describe sumptuous presents in gold from Tibet to the Tang court: 634 C.E.: a suit of golden armor; 645 C.E.: a gold vessel in the shape of a goose, capacity 60 litres of wine; 658 C.E.: a large bowl or basin of gold; 727/736 C.E.: several hundred precious silver and gold vessels and objects to be exhibited outside the imperial palace in Chang'an; 728 C.E.: a gold vase, a gold bowl, a duck of gold; 824 C.E.: a yak, a sheep, a bull and a rhinoceros of silver.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> My thanks to Michael Oppitz, ethno-historian of the Solo Khumbu region, who confirmed that the only current meaning of the term '*khum bu*' is the proper name of this region in northern Nepal. He concurred with my suggestion of '*khum bu* > *bum bu*' in this case.

<sup>18</sup> These dates and objects are quoted from the translation by Pelliot of the *Jiu Tang shu* compiled in 945 (1961: 1-78), complemented by the *Xin Tang shu* completed in 1060 (1961: 79-144, thus p. 83 (gold armour); 5, 6, 84 (goose); 85 a large bowl or basin in gold; 20 (730) gold vase *hou*, gold platter, gold bowl, a golden duck ; p. 23 as year 736 and p.103 as year 727 "hundreds of silver and gold objects to be exhibited" (it is obviously the same tribute); 824 p. 76 silver yak, rhinoceros, sheep, bull; p. 132 gold platters, silver rhinoceros and silver deer as well as (live) yaks as tribute. Pelliot explained that his translation was undertaken to correct the translation by Bushell which he qualified as "a



Figure 3 Detail of Mural in Idikut Palace, Birdhead ewer and Qilin (celestial deer) ewer, Gaochang, as drawn by Alfred Grünwedel, ca. 1906 (Altebuddhische Kultstätten in Chinesisch-Turkistan, abb. 665 )

presents " as funerary offerings to the deceased emperor Taizong (Pelliot 1961: 6, 84).

Despite these numerous descriptions of fabulous objects in gold and silver given as tribute from Tibet to China, and the record that such objects served as funerary offerings, there is a gap in subsequent Tibetan literary accounts over the centuries, almost as if there were no longer any traces in Tibet of such objects. A 12th century account of the history of Buddhism in Tibet describes the Tibetan *btsan po* sending an incense burner in the shape of a *glang po* (probably a bull)<sup>20</sup> to Li yul, referring to Khotan,<sup>21</sup> with a request to send craftsmen, threatening attack unless the king of Li yul

In addition, accompanying the Tibetan request for marriage of a Chinese princess in 702 C.E., they offered 2,000 ounces of gold and 1000 horses; earlier, the even higher dowry for the bride of Srong brtsan sgam po, the first historic *btsan po*, was 5,000 ounces of gold and hundreds of jewels.<sup>19</sup> Upon the accession of Gao Chang to the throne in 650, the Tibetan *btsan po* sent "gold, silver, precious objects, in all 15

great feat for its time (1880) but which nonetheless had numerous errors and inexact translations as well as lacunae ". Paul Demiéville refers to Bushell, re-translated some passages as well as additional sources (1952: 203). Schafer (1963: 253-255) reviews additional passages of the Tang Annals and cites Demiéville; Heather Karmay (1975: 3 note 22) cites Bushell and Demiéville.

<sup>19</sup> Demiéville [1952], n. 1 page 7, quoting the dowry figures from the Bushell translation as well as two other Tang histories; "1000 horses and 2000 ounces of gold" (Pelliot 1961: 12).

<sup>20</sup> *glang* is the typical Tibetan word for 'ox, bull', or *ba glang*. *glang po* can be synonym for *glang* or a short form of *glang po che*, 'elephant.'

<sup>21</sup> See Vitali (1990: 53) for the potential conflation of Khotan and Central Asia in post-dynastic Tibetan historic accounts of the Spu rgyal dynasty.

mandated artisans to work in Tibet.<sup>22</sup> The same source later evokes the gold fields of central Tibet and western Tibet.<sup>23</sup> Later sources describe the gold of western Tibet to be used as payment, whether as a present to entice Buddhist teachers from India to teach in the harsh desert climate of western Tibet, or gold as payment of ransom for a Tibetan king, where the equivalent of his body weight in gold is to be donated for Buddhist teachings, as well as the creation of stupa in gold, a statue in gold as large as a hand.<sup>24 25</sup>

That gold was found in abundance in Tibet was constantly repeated. In a 14th century historical work, the *Rgyal po bka' thang* by O rgyan gling pa (b. 1323), compiled in the context of a revival of interest in the ancient *btsan po* and their rituals, there are elaborate and sometimes fanciful descriptions of burials and tomb contents purported to rely on ancient sources although the royal necropolis in Central Tibet had been plundered in the aftermath of the downfall of the dynasty.<sup>26</sup> Still there may be inklings of genuine historical artefacts, such as the *Rgyal po bka' thang* description of silver vessels (recipients *snod*) for grain alcohol and wine with heads of either horse, camel or duck, which may well correspond to the gilt silver ewer with animal head now conserved in the Lhasa gtsug lha khang, initially described by Richardson (cf *supra*).<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> An incense burner in the shape of a bull is reminiscent of the many ceramic statues of hybrid fantastic creatures which were essential guardians of Chinese and Central Asian tombs during the Tang period. For the citation of Nyang Ral, *Chos 'byung me tog snying po sbrang rtsi'i bcud*, Lhasa reprint (1988: 418-419) *bod kyi btsan po'i spos kyi glang po yin pas 'di bzhes la li yul spyod pa'i rgyal po zhes bya ba bzo bo mkhas pa gcig yod zer bas/ de bod kyi btsan po'i thugs dam lha khang gi bzo bo byed pa la gnang bar zhu bya ba dang/ de ma gnang na rgyal po thugs khros nas dmag 'dren no bya ba'i bka' shog gi sgrom bu bskur nas pho nya ba btang/ pho nya bas li rje la bka' shog (la phul)....nga'i bu gsum btsan po'i phyag tu 'bu lo zhes pas...bu li gser gzung/ gser 'od/ gser thogs gsum ni lha bzo ba'i mkhas pa'i mchog yin pas bod du bzo byed du rdzongs//* See Karmay (1975: 5) for a slightly different version of this account, having a musk deer rather than a bull as a threat, quoted from the *Sba bzhed* (Stein 1961: 71-72).

<sup>23</sup> Nyang Ral (*ibid.* 1988: 461) describes the gold fields of Dong rtse wang, where abundant gold was mined to build temples of Khojarnath, Tabo, Nyarma and Tholing. See Pritzker (2008: 103) for location of gold fields near Tholing.

<sup>24</sup> Vitali (1996: 115) gold for the ransom of 'Od lde, and (1996: 116-117): statue in gold the size of a hand and several golden stūpa; the rich gold mines of Dbus and invitations to Atiśa, with nuggets of gold, gold dust and a golden mandala of 300 *srang*.

<sup>25</sup> Vitali (1996: 115) gold for the ransom of 'Od lde, and (1996: 116-117): statue in gold the size of a hand and several golden stūpa; the rich gold mines of Dbus and invitations to Atiśa, with nuggets of gold, gold dust and a golden mandala of 300 *srang*.

<sup>26</sup> Haarh (1969: 350-360 *passim*, description of the rituals continues to p. 373).

<sup>27</sup> Vitali (1990: note 4, p. 84) has drawn attention to the passage describing Srong brtsan sgam po's hiding of camel and bird head jugs in the *Rgyal po bka' thang*, reprint: 157: '*bras chang dang rgun chang dang go la'i snod/ dngul rkyen rnga mong gi mgo can gsum dang/ ngang pa'i mgo can bdun te bcu yod do//*'. Earlier in the same chapter of the *Rgyal po bka' thang*, discussion of the royal ancestors' possession of three horse-head silver flasks. This recalls the context of the Fifth Dalai Lama's assessment that the silver ewer of the Lhasa gtsug lag khang has a horse-head finial, see Richardson's comments above. *Rgyal po bka' thang* (1997: 154) *dkor cha rin po che dngul gyi bum pa rta mgo can gsum /*.

## The inscribed artefacts

1) **Two platters**, gilt silver, 29 cm diameter, height 3cm, weight approximately 935 gr., attributed to Tibet, 8th-9th century C.E.<sup>28</sup> (Figure 4: front view of platter; figure 5: reverse of platter, Shumei Family Collection/ possible detail view fig. 6):

According to the remarks of Boris Marshak, in the catalogue of the Shumei Family Collection,



Figure 4 Ceremonial Platter. Miho Museum, Japan. Inscribed in Tibetan intermixed with Chinese characters on reverse. 29.2 cm. Tooled silver with foil gilding. Weight: 935grams.

“...the low relief design in the *champlevé* technique was popular with Iranian silver-smiths during the Sasanian period as well as from 8th to 10th century, but the foil gilding and the rough and uneven hammering of the rim tend to indicate that it was made outside the lands of Iran and Central Asia. The centaur at center and the pairs of standing confronted winged animals are typical of the silverware of various Central Asian silver workshops but the specific motifs and their treatment here are distinctive.”

Marshak concluded, "Due to the Tibetan inscriptions and the aesthetic and technical distinctions, this is a fine example of early Tibetan silver."<sup>29</sup>

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See Heller (2002) for the full citations of the Fifth Dalai Lama's description, as well as the descriptions of the pilgrimage guides by Mkhyen brtse and Si tu Panchen, all of whom describe the silver ewer of the Lhasa gtsug lag khang.

<sup>28</sup> Shumei collection, Miho Museum and private collection, London, studied courtesy of John Eskenazi Gallery.

<sup>29</sup> Boris Marshak, no. 33, Plate (1996: 80-83). In the same volume see also the technical report by Pieter Meyers (Appendix: 194) which stipulates that the composition of the silver is consistent with objects from Central Asia; the foil gilding and cutting away of the silver are techniques reminiscent of Sasanian period; the iconography and shape



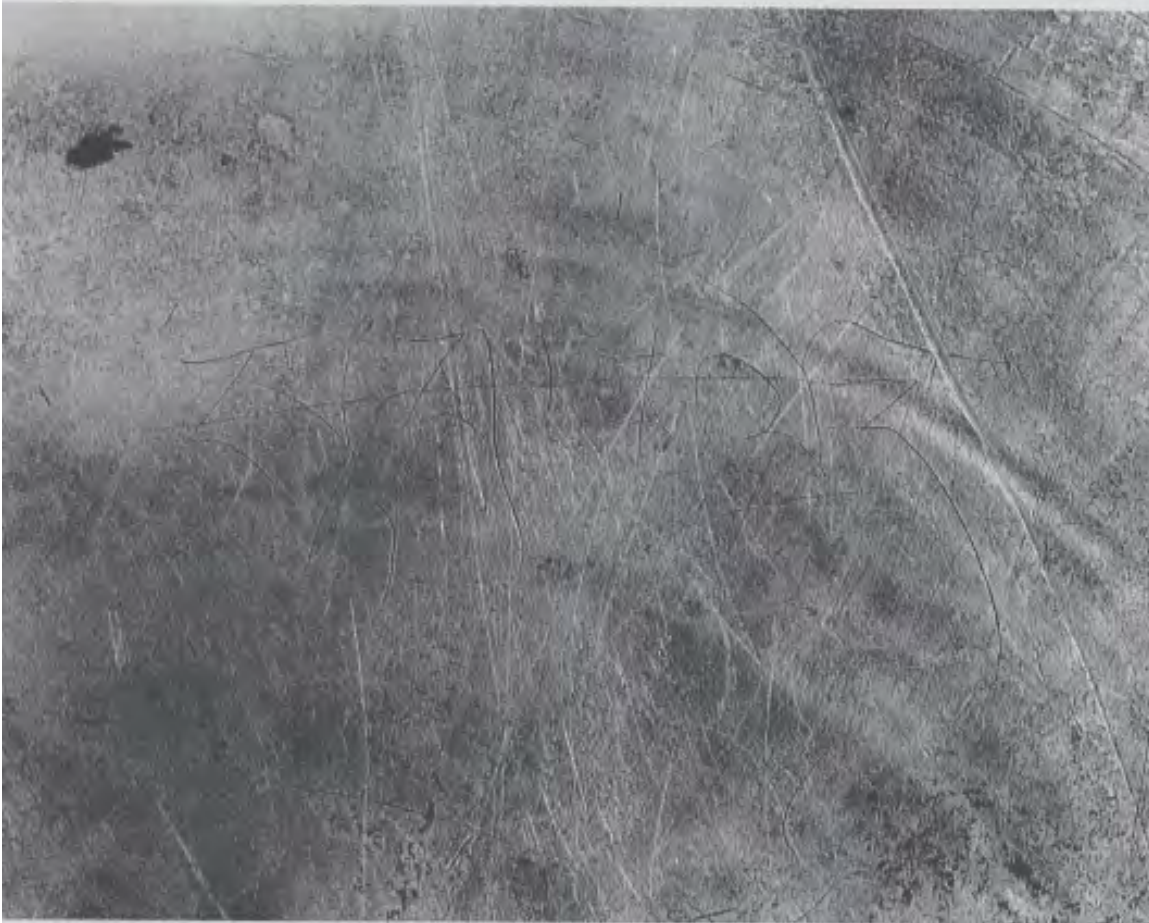


Figure 5 Stag ben log (ལྷག་བེན་ལོག་) characters

On the base of the platters, there is an inscription in Tibetan and Chinese, initially studied by Leonard van der Kuijp. There are three aligned circles on the Shumei Family platter, and five circles, non-aligned, on the London platter. The letters of the inscription are scratched on the Shumei Family Collection platter, and the same three phrases are incised on the platter in the London collection:

stag (ben) lod lha 'tsho kram nya SA (sa /very large and written side-ways)  
bzang

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(lacking a foot) are "unique". These factors as well as the Tibetan inscription indicate Tibetan provenance. Meyers further states that the uncorroded condition of the plate indicates it was never buried.



Figure 6 Shumei Collection with characters *kra zang* (ཀླ་བཟང་) and three circles

The following reading and translation/interpretation was proposed by Leonard van der Kuijp in 1996:

"*Stag (ben) lod*: at the centre, Chinese words can be identified between two Tibetan words: *stag (ben) lod*: *stag* means tiger, Chinese *ben* has a number of meanings, including root, origin or book; and *lod* signifies "relaxation" or "relaxed". *lha 'tsho*: the words at center may be identified as *lha 'tsho*, if *'tsho* is not a "miscarving" for *tshogs* these are homophones in some dialects - then the phrase would read something like \*divine assembly.\* Otherwise, it might mean "divine life" or "divine life span."

*kram bzang nya sa*: the words and graphs identifiable at the center are: *kram nya*, below which is (?b) *zang*; a larger *sa* is written sideways at a little remove from *nya* cabbage, fish, good, earth (van der Kuijp 1996: 82-83).



Subsequently, Philip Denwood studied the inscriptions of the London platter. His initial reading corresponds to the reading by van der Kuijp,<sup>30</sup> but rather than literal interpretation of the phrases.

Denwood concluded: "The Tibetan inscriptions are personal names of a type common in the Yarlung dynasty period (7th-9th century C.E.). Having read the inscriptions on the Tibetan silver dish in the Miho Museum I can certify that they are identical to those on your dish. Presumably this means the two dishes were a pair."

In the intervening years since the 1996 reading, van der Kuijp has revised his interpretation and fully concurs that these are very likely to be names.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Samten Karmay suggested that : *Lha 'tsho/mtsho* is a quite common name of women in Amdo. Other similar names, eg. *sgrol ma 'tsho*.<sup>32</sup>

In view of the numerous Dunhuang Tibetan manuscripts and inscribed stele whose texts are now accessible thanks to studies by participants in the Old Tibetan Documents On-line project, it is possible to re-examine these names. Indeed, the very nature of the platters as luxury objects makes it likely that they were made for or belonged to members of the Tibetan aristocracy.

### Name 1: stag (ben) lod ----

There are 3 occurrences of names in texts and inscriptions wherein the elements Stag and Lod are both found in a name of a principal minister of ca. 750. Although the name is slightly different in each case, each examples contains several of the same elements, which compare thus:

PT 1287	blon che dba's stag sgra	khong lod (personal name)
Zhol rdo ring	blon	stag sgra klu khong
Dbal' bzhe		stag ra klu gong

The name *lod* is also found in at least two other members of the Dba's family, dba's mang rje lha lod (PT 1287. 111) and dba's btsan bzher mdo lod, (PT 1287. 382 ), stag and lod are also found in other names of the period. At present there is not enough

<sup>30</sup> Philip Denwood, expertise for John Eskenazi Gallery (9 June 2009, unpublished), "Top right in photo: *lha 'tsho*. Left: *stag lod* (apparently interrupted by a Chinese character - perhaps 本 *ben*, "root"). Right: *kram nya bzang* (with some sort of mark to its right which doesn't seem either Tibetan or Chinese)."

<sup>31</sup> Leonard van der Kuijp, personal communication, 10.01.2012.

<sup>32</sup> Samten Karmay, personal communication, 09.12.2011.

evidence to indicate that Stag ben lod is the same person as the illustrious minister - there are not enough elements to fully support this conclusion. However, it is possible that the person Stag ben lod may well have been from the same clan/family.

**Name 2: kram bzang nya or kram nya bzang ----**

In the Lcang bu rdo ring inscription, the builder of the temple is named:

zhang tshes pong stag bzang nya sto (of Tshes spong clan)

Within the same *rdo ring* inscription he is referred to several times as zhang nya sto

In the *Dbā' bzhed*, among the ministers (*blon*) zhang nya bzang (fol. 6b, 8b, 17b). This refers all to one person, a member of sNa snam clan according to *Dbā' bzhed* (2000: n. 90 and n. 240)

**Name 3: kram nya bzang lha 'tsho**

**(a woman of the family of Zhang nya bzang)**

We tentatively consider that these fabulous platters might have been made for offerings at a wedding celebration, due to the decorative motifs of the male and female couples of standing winged creatures. If so, possibly this marriage was to be contracted between the two people named in the inscriptions, Stag ben lod and Kram bzang nya lha 'tsho, whose names indicate that they may have been related to eminent aristocratic families of central Tibet.

2) **Gold cup**, height 3.9 cm, diameter 9.5 cm, weight: 168 grams, private collection. (Figure 7, gold cup and figure 8, inscription on base of gold cup):



Figure 7 Gold cup with beading 3.9 height diameter 9.5 cm, 168 grammes. Private Collection.



Figure 8 Inscriptions in Tibetan. Circle marks are indicating weight. Private Collection

This gold cup is shaped with a low and relatively wide bowl, a very narrow brim, and a ring handle with a flat upper edge decorated in relief with a floral design. The base of the cup is decorated by beading. Cups of this shape were well known in Central Asia during the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries, and some silver cups of this shape have been identified as Tibetan cups due to their carved decoration of hybrid animals or lions on the bowl<sup>33</sup>. The low beaded foot and the ring handle with lobed thumb rest are well documented in Sogdian silver attributed to the 8th century.<sup>34</sup> This cup has a perfectly plain bowl; the carved handle and beading on the base constitute its sole decoration.

The Tibetan *dbu can* inscription is scratched on the bottom of the cup. The inscription comprises one line of writing above which are five small circles, in horizontal alignment, all of the same diameter. These appear to be punched, rather than incised. The inter-syllabic punctuation is a single dot, and the right upper stem of each letter has a bead of granulated gold: 'o. rgyad. 'pan. lod

<sup>33</sup> See Carter (1998: 26) for Central Asian types of cups and Fig. 13a-b, Cup, Tibet, partially gilt silver, diameter 14 cm, lion cup; see Heller (2002: figures 40-43) for silver cups parcel gilt of this period.

<sup>34</sup> See Marshak (1971:T 46) and remarks on this cup by Melikian-Chirvani (2011: 99, plate 4.6).

This inscription again probably is a personal name of a Tibetan although the historic identification is undetermined at present.<sup>35</sup> The technique of granulated gold is known on horse medallions recovered from a Tibetan tomb of the dynastic period in central Tibet.<sup>36</sup>

3) **Gilt silver flask**, height: 19 cm, weight: 437 grams, Pritzker collection. (Figure 9, flask and figure 10, inscription on base of flask):

This cast and chased ovoid flask with beaded edge on the lower rim, has raised designs of three panels of fabulous, hybrid animals in floral and leaf surrounds: a horse, a dragon and a feline creature. The choice of design reflects the importance of horses in Tibet, as a principle article of trade, and as a ritual animal in royal or aristocratic funerary rituals described in the Dunhuang manuscripts and confirmed by archaeological investigations throughout Tibet.<sup>37</sup> This hybrid horse has the tail of a bird. The dragon was a Chinese motif imported to Tibet in the dynastic period, as known from silks recovered from the excavations of Tibetan tombs at Dulan. The third hybrid creature has the head and paws of a feline and a similar wing structure to the horse as well as a bird's tail feathers. The gilding was formerly all over the body of the vase up to the neck, but now what little remains are retained in the interstices beside the raised elements. The shape of the flask follows a model found in two other examples, both of similar height and weight, which have been attributed to ca 8th - 9th century.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In the Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot Tibétain 1060, line 55, o rgyad appears as a region name. I thank Charles Ramble for the information that 'o rgyad appears as part of the name of a figure from Mustang around the early 13th century.

<sup>36</sup> See note 20 *supra* on the horse plaques from Nankartse, Tibet, 7-9th century, and discussion of horses in Heller (2003: 55-64).

<sup>37</sup> For ritual importance of the horse, see Stein (1971) for discussion of horse sacrifice in Tibetan funerary rituals see *Southern Ethnology and Archeology*, "A briefing of the old graves at Lhatse and Tingri", Chengdu University, 1991: 105-125, Xu Xinguo (1996, 2006), and Heller (2006).

<sup>38</sup> The flask conserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art has a now illegible Tibetan inscription on the upper rim, h. 22.9 cm, (see Carter 1998: 23). The flask now conserved in the Ashmolean Museum has no inscription: EA 1999.98 h. 17 cm, weight 454.7 gr., see Heller (2007: 74-75).



Figure 9. Gilt silver flask. Pritzker Collection.



Transliteration of the inscription: g-yung drung brtan ba'i  
dkor ya re la srang bcu bzhi ||

Figure 10. Inscription at the bottom of the silver flask of  
the Pritzker Collection

Inside the base of the vase a Tibetan inscription is incised in *dbu can* letters:

: G.yung .drung. brtan. pa'i. dkor.ya. re. la. srang. bcu. bzhi /:/

From the treasury of G.yung drung brtan pa, 14 srang was spent to make this  
one (of a pair).

The term *dkor* refers specifically to the possessions of a monk/ monastery. The term *srang* is found as an official measurement term in ancient Tibetan chronicles and in Tibetan contracts from the Dunhuang manuscripts (Imaeda & Takeuchi 1990: 980/ PT 1287, 0454; Takeuchi 1995: 314). The identification of G.yung drung brtan pa is problematic. As far as I have been able to determine, this name has not been recorded in royal genealogies nor lists of ministers of the ancient Tibetan kingdom, but these lists are not complete. In modern times, G.yung drung brtan pa is a common personal name among practitioners of Bon religion. However, during the Spu rgyal dynasty, in

historic decrees the term *g.yung drung* meant “in perpetuity” without reference to Bon religion, thus *G.yung drung brtan pa* (to protect in perpetuity) might have been a name either of a person or possibly the name of a fortress or Buddhist monastery.<sup>39</sup>

H.E. Richardson was categorical in his opinion that the handwriting and punctuation indicate a date of no later than the 9th century.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, similar punctuation, shape of letters and the spelling 'a with an additional stroke at the upper right curve are distinctive and correspond to the punctuation alternation of single and double tsheg ( : . ) (positioned in mid-letter : . (in middle especially for the letters *nga* and *da* ) and the same shape 'a as carved in the Bsam yas pillar which is dated around 764 A.D (cf. Richardson 1985: 2).

4) **Gilt silver Cup**, height 10.2 cm, diameter 10.2 cm; Cleveland Museum of Art, Severance and Greta Milliken Purchase Fund, 1998.67.2 (figure 11, cup and figure 12, inscription on base of cup):

This is a flat-bottomed cup made of partially gilt silver with exterior decorations carved into the metal while the interior is left smooth. There is a double ring handle and a band of beading soldered on to the cup. Two standing lions and a feline creature with horns are represented amidst floral and vine scrolls on the cup (Carter 1998: 24).

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<sup>39</sup> Samten Karmay, "*G.yung drung brtan pa* is apparently a name, not known to me; *dkor* does refer to possessions of a monk/monastery" (personal communication 28.02.2000). Dan Martin (personal communication 27.10.2011) concurred with this interpretation as did Charles Ramble (personal communication 29.09.11) who suggested that *G.yung drung brtan pa* here might well be the name of a Buddhist monastery. In this period, *g.yung drung* signifies "unchanging, enduring like the swastika" and "in perpetuity;" it is a frequent term in stele inscriptions referring to Buddhism (see Richardson 1985: 176, and Sam van Schaik's article in the present volume, for discussion of IOL 1746 where the expression *g.yung drung gi chos* is translated as "eternal Dharma".)

<sup>40</sup> H. E. Richardson, personal interview in St. Andrews, April 2000.





Figure 11. Cleveland Museum of Art

There is a one-line inscription on the base of the cup, incised in *dbu can*, and beneath the inscription, there are three circle marks, and three lines.

/:/phan: shIng: gong: skyes: gyi: sug: byad: //

This inscription was first studied by Heather Karmay who transcribed the last syllable as *byang* or *byad*, and translated the inscription, "personal possessions of the high born princess", this designation interpreted as an honorific title of Wen cheng, the Chinese bride of Srong brtsan sgam po, the first historic *btsan po*.<sup>41</sup> Her remarks were quoted by Martha Carter, although Carter noted H.E. Richardson's objections to identifying the owner of the cup as Wen cheng, due to the spelling of her name in Tibetan as Mun sheng or Mun shang, not phan shing. Richardson also suggested that this might be a place name rather than that of a person.

In the opinion of Tsuguhito Takeuchi, *phan shing gong skyes* is most likely to be taken as a personal name, whoever it is and whatever it means.

<sup>41</sup> Heather Karmay, private expertise, cited by Carter (1998: 23). In my previous study of this inscription (Heller 2002) following the methodology of van der Kuijp 1996, I proposed a literal translation, however I now concur that *phan shing gong skyes* is a name, and not to be interpreted literally.

He concurred with Richardson's objections to the identification of the Chinese princess Wen cheng, and noted that *gong skyes* "high born" might refer to someone of noble birth, but it could be taken as a common personal name like other similar names



Figure 12. Bottom of the cup. Cleveland Museum of Art.  
Transliteration: Phan shing gong skyes gyi sug byad

(e.g. *lha skyes*). It would be a bit too far to consider this as a mixture of phonetic transcription and *calque* translation of Chinese *gong-jo*.<sup>42</sup>

The identification of the owner of this cup remains elusive to the present. The three circles underneath the inscribed letters are now understood to be analogous to those on the silver platter discussed above; the three lines may be yet another way

of indicating weight, insofar as three horizontal lines constitute the Chinese numeral "three".

5) **Large Cup with Ring Handle**, h. 4.4 cm, width at handle 14.9 cm. diameter of foot, 6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Pat and Johan Rosenwald and The Dillon Fund Gifts, and Rogers and Louis V. Bell Funds, 2001.628. (Figure 13, cup profile view, figure 14, handle, and inscription):



Figure 13. gilt silver cup, Metropolitan Museum of Art, h. 4.4 cm

This cup in parcel gilt silver has exterior decorations representing stylized honeysuckle leaves, vines and flowers. The ring handle with flat thumb rest decorated with a rampant lion and beading have been soldered on to the cup. Footed silver cups with ring handles were well known in Central Asia at the time of the Tibetan empire (see figure 1, Tibetan *btsan po* holding ring cup, *supra*) and were common in Sogdian silverwork of the period (Marshak 1971, plates T 12, T 28, T42, T

<sup>42</sup> Personal communications from Tsughuito Takeuchi, April 12, 1997, 2002 and 2006.



45).



Figure 14. Inside of Figure 13. Metropolitan Museum of Art

The inscription consists of one Tibetan letter in *dbu can*, *ka*, scratched into the bowl of the cup, which is otherwise plain. It is clear that this is not a name, but possibly a method of numbering, *ka* being the first letter of the Tibetan alphabet. Or this may be an abbreviation for a personal name or a place name which is as yet unidentified.<sup>43</sup>

6) **Belt segments**, hammered gold, 69 m x 42mm, 35 mm x 27 mm (2) 25 mm diameter. Private collection: Memhet Hassan Asian Art. (figure 15, 16, front of segments, and figure 16, 17, reverse of segments with inscription):

<sup>43</sup> In the 2004 report on the excavations of Dulan published by Beijing University and Qinghai Archaeological Institute, a stone section of a *rdo ring* was excavated, with a single syllable on each side of the stone: *blon khri sha'u ka*. The word *blon* "minister" is understood to be the first word, but the order of three phonemes of his name is not yet determined, nor is the identification of this person. Even so, one may note that one syllable is the letter *ka*, as in the inscription of this cup (see *Tibetan tombs at Dulan Qinghai*, 2005: 109).



Figure 15. Belt segments 69 mm x 42mm, 35 mm x 27 mm (2) 25 mm dia. Mehmet Hassan Asian Art, Bangkok.



Figure 16. Belt segments 69 mm x 42mm, 35 mm x 27 mm (2) 25 mm dia. Mehmet Hassan Asian Art, Bangkok



Figure 17 Fragment of gold saddle, 30 x 10 cm.

This belt buckle and segments made of hammered gold all present raised decoration representing stylized vines and leaves. On the reverse of the belt buckle, a single Tibetan letter was scratched, and 5 aligned small circles in a row, adjacent to a large circle comprising ten small circles. These are analogous to the five circles on the gold cup (cf. *supra*) and are again understood to be an indication of weight.

The inscribed letter is very faintly scratched and is tentatively read *gya*. The inscription is too fragmentary to interpret at this time, as possibly there are additional letters which have now been effaced.

7) **Fragment of gold saddle**, hammered gold sheet, turquoise and agate, length approximately 30 cm, width 7 to 10 cm. (figure 18, saddle fragment, figure 19, inscription on saddle):



Figure 18 Fragment of gold saddle, 30 x 10 cm.

This fragment of a saddle is similar to excavated fragmentary examples of Tibetan and Central Asian saddles, with their distinctive decoration of dynamic animals, such as this hybrid creature with the head of a dragon, the paws and body of a

feline and wings, depicted within a surround of floral and vine decoration.<sup>44</sup> The inscription is incised letters *dbu can* along the lower edge of the saddle. Due the fragmentary nature of the artefact, the inscription is incomplete; there is no name and the inscription provides detail of the weight of two objects:

Siddham single, plain,//// sga: gser gyi :zhu : lub: srang 'sum: cu: rtša: lnga'  
dang\_zho' nyis/ spang: rgyan: da: a: long gyI: dngul: srang pyad: dang bcu gcig

This may be interpreted as follows: Altogether for the golden saddle, 35 *srang* and 2 *zho* of gold, and for the (ear)ring with floral decoration in silver, one half- *srang* and 11 (... smaller units of silver).

In regard to the punctuation, clearly several times the: mark is used rather than the single point; there is the initial punctuation of the siddham; the lack of final punctuation implies that the inscription is interrupted due to breakage. For the letter *nga*, the single *tsheg* is positioned in the middle of the letter, following the convention of the lettering observed on the Zhol rdo ring and the silver beaker (Fig. 10 supra).<sup>45</sup> The inscription is understood to refer to an inventory of contents, such as written on the wooden slips recovered from the excavations of the Dulan tombs.<sup>46</sup>

8) **Seal** (fig. 19), silver, copper, gold and nickel alloy, 2 cm square, Zou Xicheng Collection:

This seal shows a male rider mounted on a horse, holding the reins and what appears to be a whip towards the haunch of the horse.

There is an inscription carved in incised letters: *Mang zigs rgya*.

This seal has been studied by Chinese scholars, who formulated the hypothesis that in the inscription, *rgya* signifies the seal and *mang zigs* would be the post station to which this seal was affiliated (Chen Qingying & Zou Xicheng 2008: 203-206).

<sup>44</sup> For similar saddles in gilt silver now conserved in the Pritzker collection see Heller (2003).

<sup>45</sup> It is to be noted that the numbering does not use the system of phonetic alliteration, ie. sum cu so lnga, but rather sum cu rtša lnga. This may also be observed in Pt 0016, drug cu rtša gnyIs, Pt 0239, gsum cu rtša gnyIs, Pt 0999 sum cu rtša lnga, Pt 1111 drug cu rtša phyedang, bdun cu rtša gchig, dgu bcu rtša phyedang, brgyad cu rtša lnga, Pt 1120 sum cu rtša phyed, Pt 2204c brgyad cu rtša...and ITJ 0733 bdun cu rtša gnyis.

<sup>46</sup> See Heller (1998b: 84-92, fig. 4) for the Dulan wooden slip with partial inventory of the tomb.





Figure 19. Flying horse herald, Zou Xicheng Collection

In the light of the research of Sam van Schaik on the letters of Mazar Tagh presented in this volume, N 873 is a small rectangular piece of wood (10.5 x 2.2. width, 0.4 thick) on which the names of two people are written: Blon Mang gzigs and Blon mDo bzang. Insofar as

the seal reads "Mang zigs" and the name of the minister is Blon Mang gzigs, it is proposed to identify this seal as the personal seal of the minister Blon Mang gzigs.

III. A non-inscribed gold cup attributed to the Tibetan Empire in Central Asia cup . This stem cup is decorated with the twelve animals of the zodiac in the upper register. The bowl of the cup has hybrid fantastic creatures - a feline with horn, a horse with wings and paws, or a dragon with tailfeathers, as well as the recumbent deer - all very similar to those observed on the silver beaker and golden saddle with Tibetan inscriptions. The exquisitely detailed carving of such vivacious, roaring creatures does not correspond to the typical taste of the Tang court, thus it is proposed that this cup is a commission for Tibetan aristocracy.



Figure 20. Gold cup attributed to Tibetan Empire in Central Asia, Stem Cup China (Xinjiang Autonomous Region, Central Asia), Period of Tibetan Empire, 7th–9th century Gold with repoussé decoration H. 3 ½ in. (8.9 cm); Diam. of mouth 2 ¾ in. (7 cm) Purchase, 2001 Benefit Fund, 2002 Metropolitan Museum of Art

### III. Weight marks

In terms of the weight marks, we have observed different systems in the artefacts so labelled. The gold belt segment and the gold cup in the private collection both have five small circles aligned in a row, punched, while the use of three lines and three circles of the cup in the Cleveland Museum of Art is analogous to the inscription on the silver platter of the Shumei Family collection, which also has three aligned circles. The three parallel-incised lines have also been observed as an indication of a unit of measure or weight on Sogdian silver.<sup>47</sup> These are two examples of weight marks but there may also be other systems of indicating weight.

<sup>47</sup> See Boris Marshak, Fig. 7, photograph of the base of a Sogdian bowl with "three parallel lines incised on base resembling Chinese number 3 might indicate three units of some kind of weight measure" (A Sogdian Silver bowl in the Freer Gallery of Art) *Ars Orientalis* xxix: 102-110.

## Conclusion

These silver and gold artefacts reflect Tibetan participation in flourishing international commerce along the Silk Routes. Due to their decorative motifs of confronting or addorsed fantastic hybrid creatures, the distinctive gold cladding and metallurgical techniques and the inscribed indicators of weight, these objects are concrete proof for the particular high esteem of the aesthetics and skills of Sogdian metalwork in early Tibet. The Tibetan inscriptions indicate possession of these artefacts by Tibetan people and their eventual provenance from Tibetan tombs.<sup>48</sup> Still, at present we cannot yet determine who were the craftsmen, nor where were their ateliers - perhaps itinerant encampments of Sogdian and Tibetan artisans following the pattern of mobility of the Tibetan *btsan po* and his entourage and the movements of troops of Tibetan armies throughout the territories of the Tibetan empire.<sup>49</sup> This study of these inscriptions is a limited corpus, certainly not exhaustive, but it indicates that the majority of the inscriptions do refer to personal names, mostly of Tibetan people but possibly also of places. It remains to be determined to whom these artefacts belonged. In the context of Tibetan funerary customs of the *Spu rgyal* dynastic period, where the *btsan po* and aristocrats were buried in tombs replete with all the goods needed for their well-being in the "afterlife", it may be suggested that some of these artefacts were produced for burial, and that possibly the Tibetan personal names on the artefacts reflect identifications of the people with whom the artefacts were buried.

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<sup>48</sup> Although Meyers' technical study (note 27 *supra*) on the plate in the Shumei Family Collection stated that its uncorroded state indicated that it had never been buried, i.e. it had not been in contact with earth, it may have been buried inside a container in a chamber of a rapidly plundered tomb. The impeccable condition, e.g. total lack of wear, tends to suggest it was produced and intended for burial, then subsequently conserved above ground, similar to the silver saddle and artefacts observed in a cave near the Dulan tombs by Filchner (cf. note 3 *supra*) and the large parcel-gilt silver ewer in Lhasa.

<sup>49</sup> Itinerant metalworkers were travellers with the Tibetan troops for repairs of the armour and horse trappings. Goldsmiths and silversmiths could be itinerant insofar as the techniques for beating and hammering gold and silver do not require large high temperature kilns or elaborate apparatus. Sogdian migrants (merchants, craftsmen in metal and textiles) who subsequently established colonies in Dunhuang, Chang'an, Chengdu and other regions of China have been the subject of numerous studies. See for example de la Vaissière & Trombert (2005).

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# Variation in mortuary practice on the early Tibetan plateau and the high Himalayas

Mark Aldenderfer

The royal tombs at Phyong-rgyas and similar sites in central and eastern Tibet are rightly seen as the most impressive mortuary facilities anywhere on the plateau. But while widely known, they are hardly representative of the range of such sites. Hundreds, possibly thousands, of more humble tombs have been excavated on the plateau since the 1980s (Chayet 1994: 74; Huo 1995), and these range in date from the Late Neolithic through the end of the imperial period in the ninth century C.E., after which sky burial becomes the most common form of mortuary practice.

Although there has been a limited scope of archaeological research on the Tibetan plateau, it is apparent that there is significant variation in pre-Buddhist era mortuary practices.<sup>1</sup> Explaining this variability is a key research question in the prehistory of the region, and to that end, I will examine what is reliably known from archaeological research and selected historical sources to identify patterns and trends in mortuary practice that may be attributed to migration, the diffusion of ideas from other regions, or possible indigenous inventions. I will focus upon three themes or trends that characterize mortuary traditions until the imperial period: the transformation of telluric facilities to tumuli and mounds, the appearance of animal remains within the tombs, and the treatment of the remains of the dead.

Three regions are included in this comparative study: central Tibet near Lhasa, far western Tibet, and the Northwestern Himalayas, including Ladhak in India and Upper Mustang in Nepal (Figure 1), although I will also bring in relevant comparative data from other areas that surround the plateau. Within each geographic region, I

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<sup>1</sup> Some explanation of the term 'pre-Buddhist' is required. I use the term to mean what it says—archaeological materials from the plateau that can be reliably dated to a time frame that precedes the material evidence of the appearance of Buddhist religious practice in central Tibet around the mid-7<sup>th</sup> C. C.E.. Given that the archaeological record of the plateau is so poorly understood, it is difficult to assign meaningful terms to those remains that might be more familiar to historians, Tibetologists, and practitioners or scholars of Tibetan Buddhism or Bon.

examine sites that have good chronological control, either dated directly by some chronometric method or cross-dated by comparisons of mortuary architecture or tomb contexts with sites that do have good control of time. Although I acknowledge this may lead to the exclusion from consideration of important data such as that collected by John Bellezza (2002) in his important research on the Byang Tang as well as most of the sites described by luminaries such as Roerich, Tucci, and others, I justify this restriction by simply noting that without control of time, it is difficult to develop robust inferences about cultural practices. Only continued research will bring sites described by these explorers into a more secure cultural and temporal framework. Finally, I will also make a concerted effort to avoid unreasonable speculation about how observed patterns of variation in mortuary practice in these three regions can be associated with Bon, Zhang Zhung, or some other social, religious, or political formation. As more data are accumulated, it may be possible to relate the specifics of mortuary practice to one of them, but at present, such associations are difficult to support.

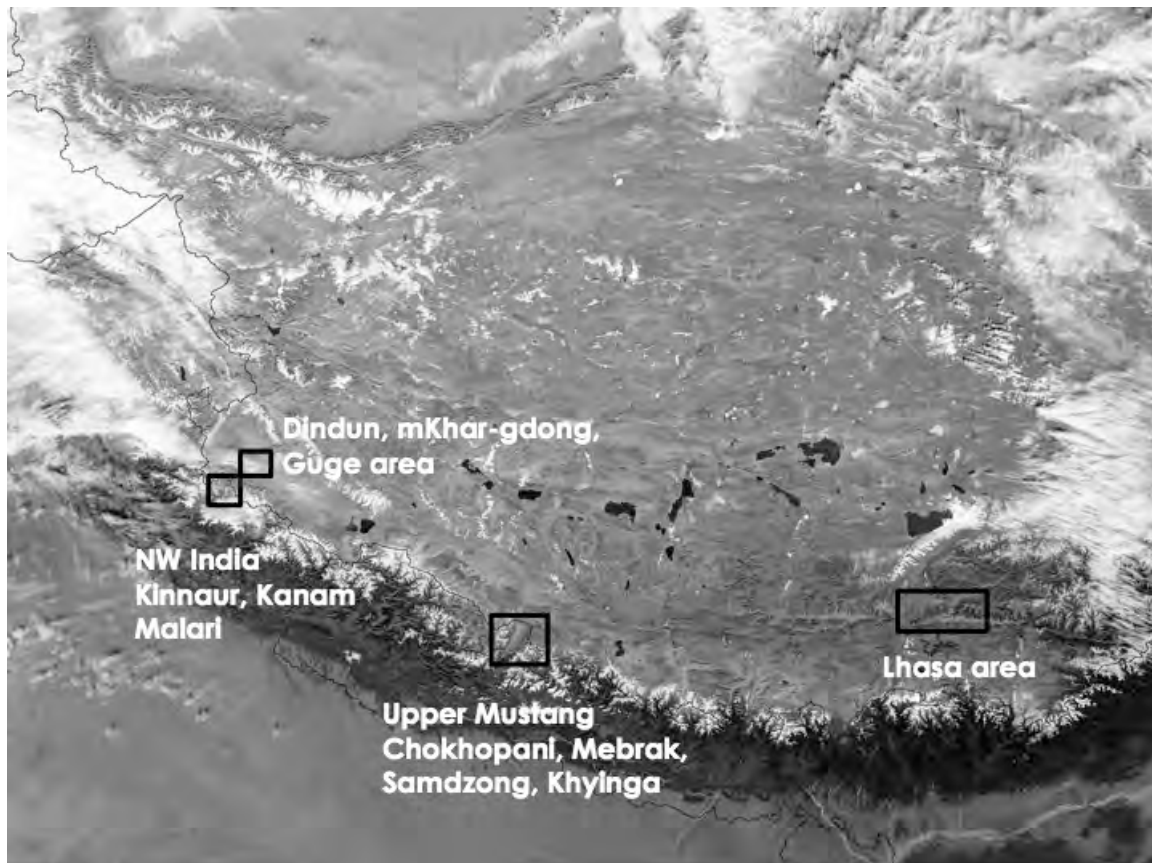
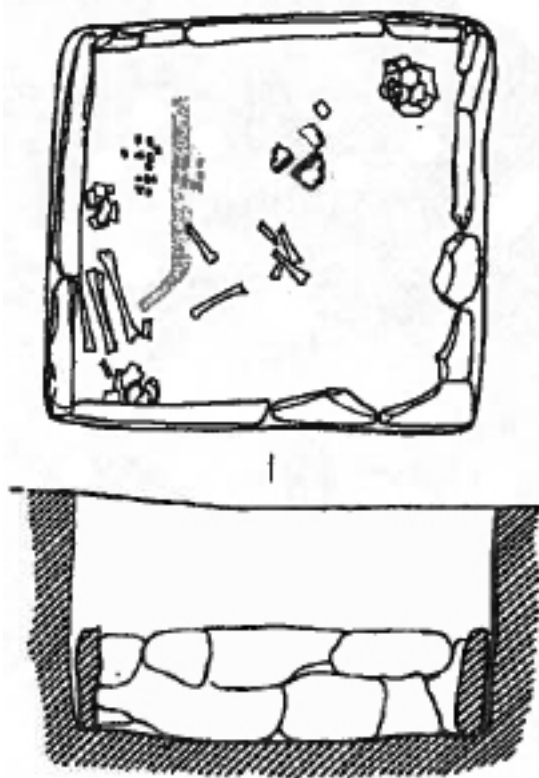


Figure 1

## Telluric burial

There is a deep tradition of telluric (below-ground) burial on the Tibetan plateau that stretches back to the Late Neolithic. The earliest evidence for this mortuary practice comes from Chugong (Chin: Qugong), a site located 5 km north of Lhasa (Institute of Archaeology 1999). The site appears to have been a small village, and although heavily disturbed by local people who mined the site for soil, it offers important evidence for a Neolithic-era occupation of the central plateau. A mortuary component consisting of 32 tombs is found approximately 300m to the northwest of the village. Three tombs thought to be intrusive and dating to a later period have also been discovered in the village component.

The initial occupation of the site begins around 1700 B.C.E., and ends around 1100 B.C.E.<sup>2</sup> The tombs are square-to-rectangular in form, lined with stones along the



interior walls, and are irregularly capped or covered with stones. The floors of the tombs are natural soil. The depth of the burial chamber of these tombs varies from 30-60 cm, and the tombs do not protrude above the ground surface. Tomb M111, dated to 1598-1055 B.C.E., is a good example of the square variant (Fig. 2a).

All four sides of the tomb are lined with stones, and irregularly shaped stones form a cap. Tomb M203 is a good example of the rectangular type with all four interior walls lined with stones (Fig. 2b).

Figure 2a. Tomb M111, Chugong. (after Institute of Archaeology 1999: 20)

<sup>2</sup> The investigators list a total of eight radiocarbon assays, three of which have been rejected by the excavators as being too late and not associated with the village occupation (Institute of Archaeology 1999: 233, Table 3). One of these (Zk-2560) dates a tomb (M103) to 758-401 B.C.E.. See Aldenderfer and Zhang (2004: 31-32 and Table III for a discussion of the dating of the site.



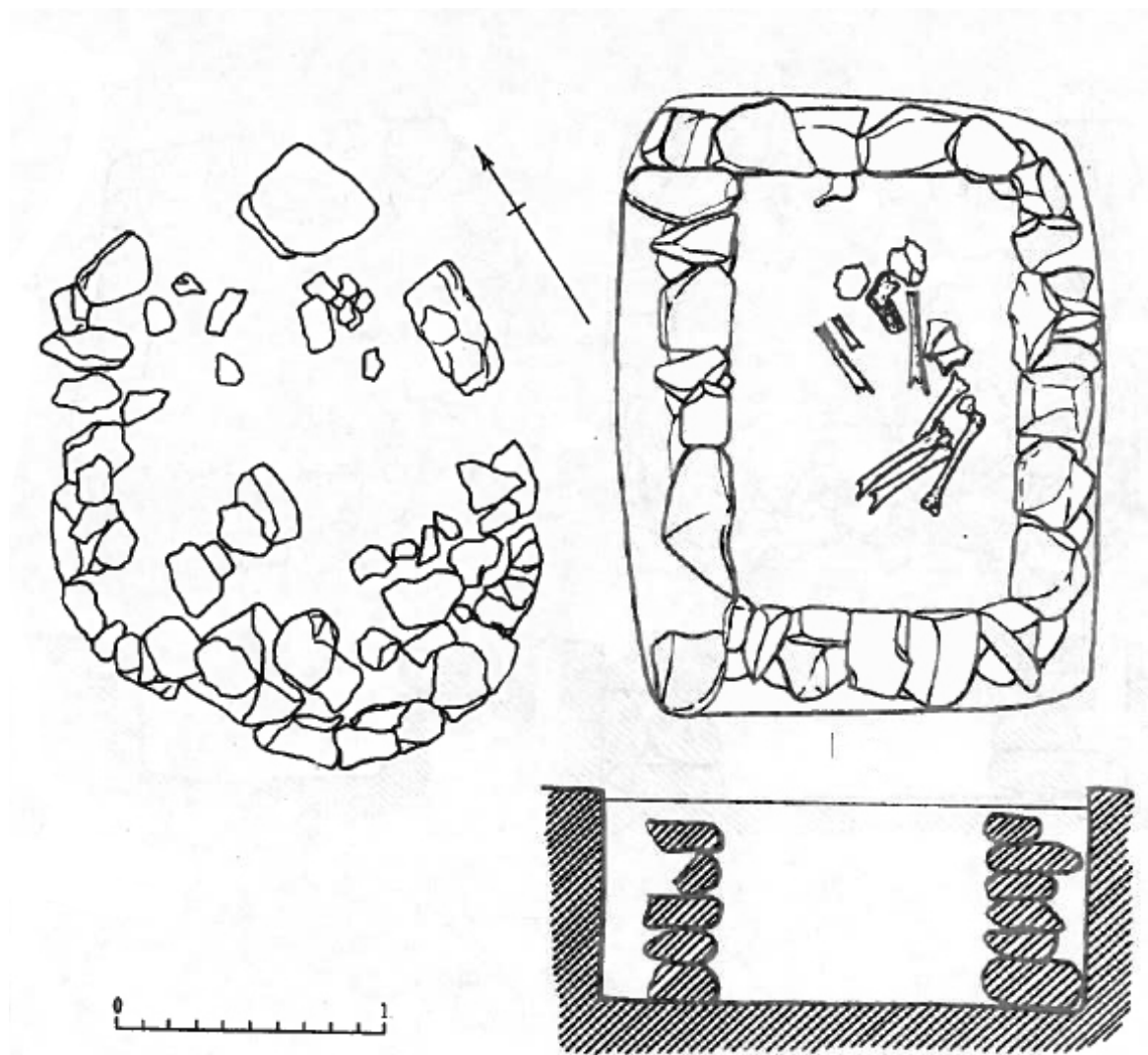


Figure 2b. Tomb M203, Chugong. (after Institute of Archaeology 1999: 199). Scale bar is 1 m.

In contrast, Tomb M207 is much simpler, with only a single wall lined with stones (Fig. 2c).

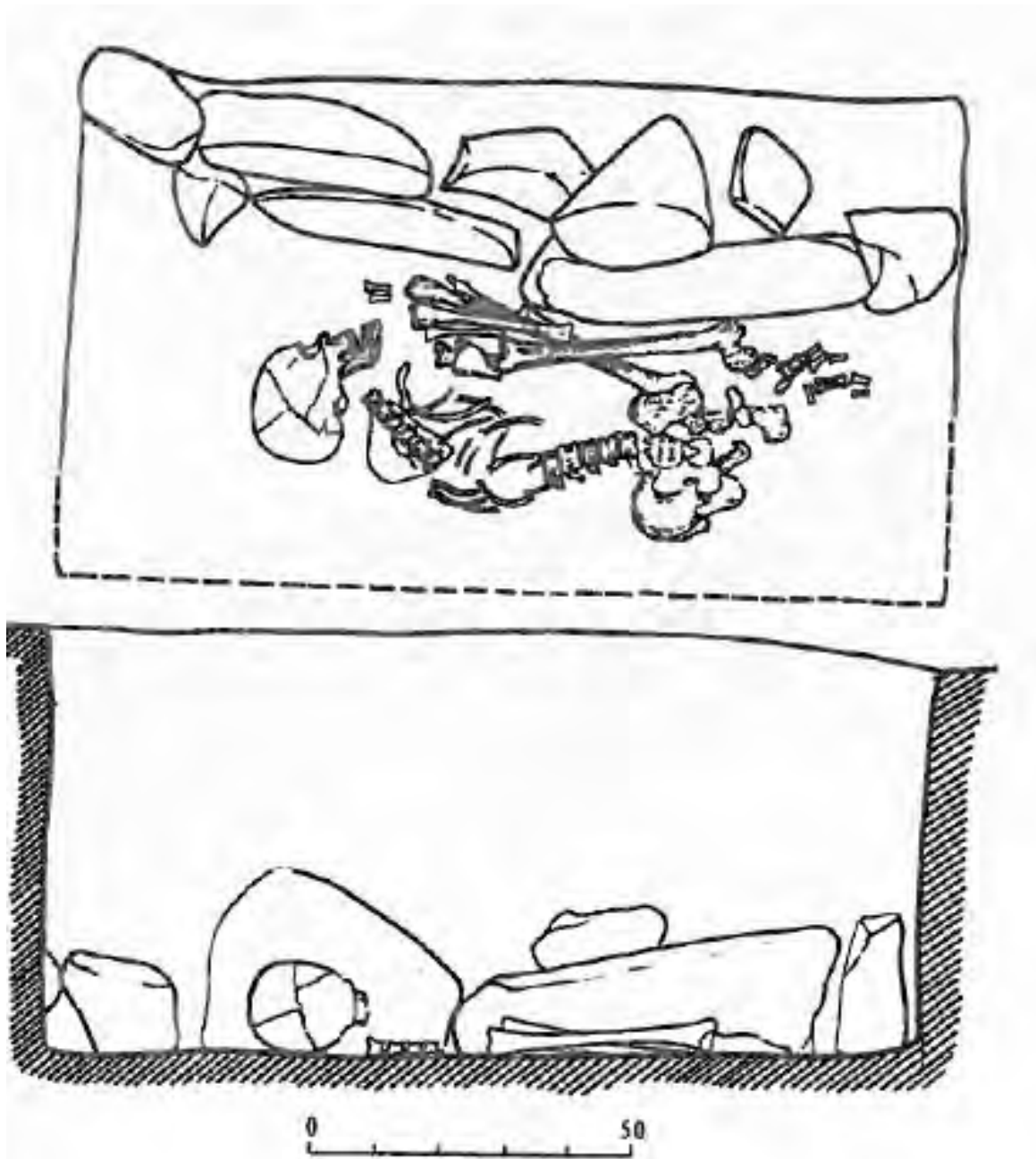


Figure 2c. Tomb M207, Chugong. (after Institute of Archaeology 1999: 194). Scale bar is 50 cm.

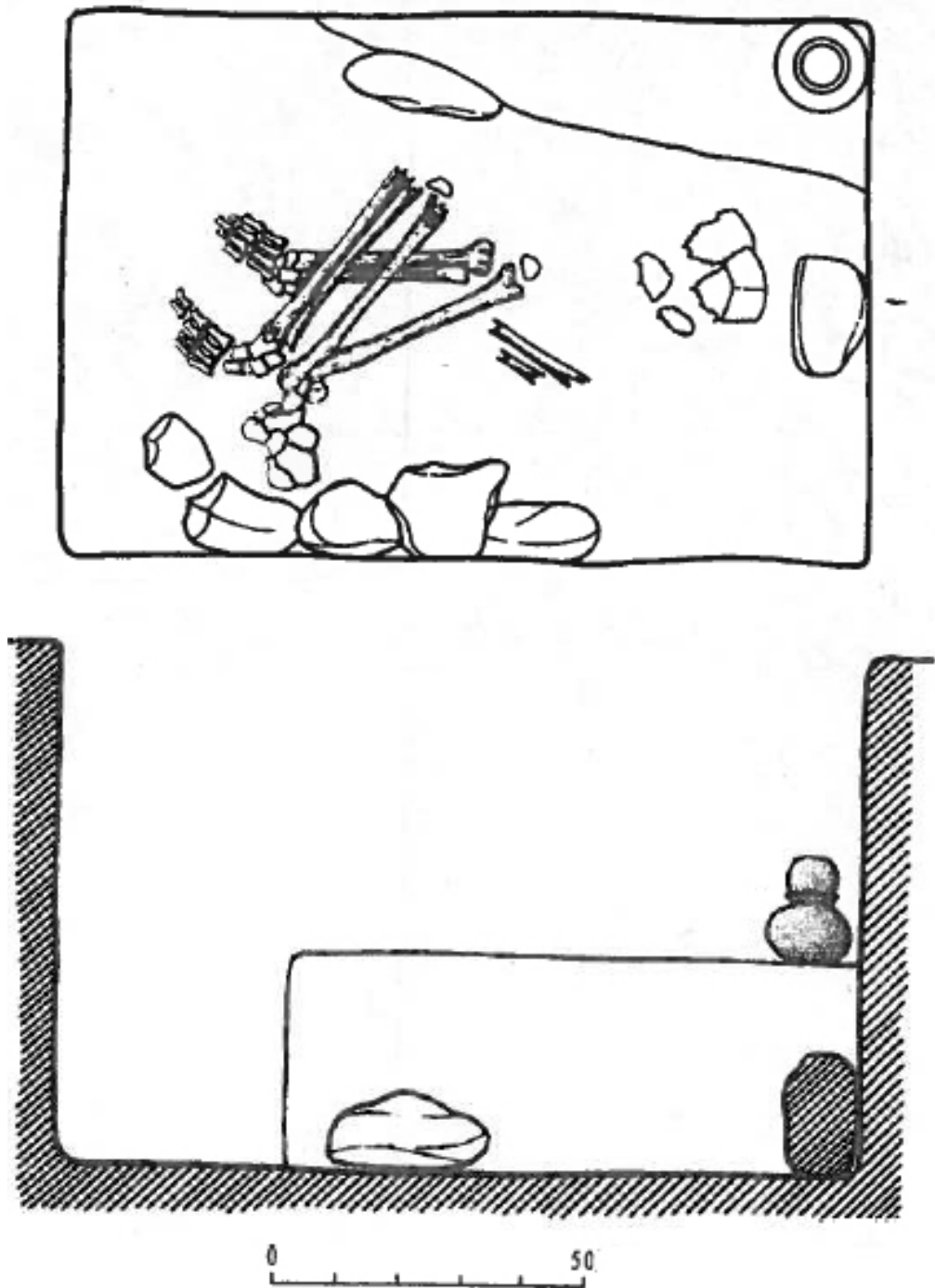


Figure 2d. Tomb M105, Chugong. (after Institute of Archaeology 1999: 195). Scale bar is 50 cm.

Some tombs, like M105, have small, low benches within their walls, and in a few instances, have small, empty niches that jut from them (Fig. 2d). Note that this tomb is not rock lined, and is simply an excavated pit.

The mortuary facilities at Chugong are quite different from somewhat earlier as well as contemporary mortuary traditions found in extreme northeastern Qinghai and Gansu. There, a sequence of three well-defined and dated Neolithic period archaeological cultures have been observed: Majiayao (3400–2800 B.C.), Banshan (2800–2300 B.C.), and Machang (2300–2100 B.C.). Two Bronze Age cultures— Quijia (2600–1600 B.C.E.) and Xindian (1600–500 B.C.E.) are also known from the region. Most sites of these five cultures have cemeteries associated with them, and the style of mortuary facility in the Neolithic era sites is generally of an excavated rectangular tomb that contained a wooden coffin most often in a trapezoidal form (Chayet 1994: 52–53). Quijia cemeteries are similar; they have rectangular pits that contain hollowed tree trunks as coffins. In some instances, the tombs are large enough to have narrow passages that lead into them and which are reminiscent of very shallow shaft tombs (Chayet 1994: 61). Finally, Xindian cemeteries are composed of circular cist tombs; this culture is believed to have moved into the western reaches of Qinghai from northern China and appears to represent a break in mortuary tradition in the region.

Although there is other evidence for telluric burial dating to the Neolithic period on the plateau, due to a lack of radiometric dating, it is difficult to be fully confident in the assignment of these tombs to this period. Two Chinese archaeologists—Huo (1995) and Xiage (1998) have attempted to systematize these data for the central and southern parts of the plateau. Despite these efforts, clear patterns are not obvious. Tombs assigned to the Neolithic are described as “stone coffins,” are square or rectangular in form, and are made either with large flat slabs for walls and floors, or coursed, uncut stone used to construct walls. An uncommon, more complex form is said to be a stone cyst tomb with an entrance, tunnel passage, and central chamber (Huo, 1995). Some of these tombs, especially those in the vicinity of the Neolithic site of Karou in far eastern Tibet, are thought to have originated from migrants to the plateau of people from the adjacent, lower elevation valleys on western Sichuan (Tong, 1978). In short, while tombs are in abundance on the plateau, they currently contribute little to our knowledge of the Neolithic because they have not been systematically dated.

Telluric mortuary facilities are also common in western Tibet and in the northwestern Himalayas but date somewhat later in time. Perhaps the best known of these facilities are the famous “cave tombs” of Upper Mustang in Nepal. Three archaeological phases defined primarily by tombs and their contents have been defined: Chokhopani (1000 B.C.E.–450 B.C.E.; Simons, Schön, and S. Shrestha 1994a, 1994b, 1998; Schön 2001; Schön and Simons 2001), Mebrak (400 B.C.E.–50 C.E.; Alt et al.

2003), and a third period, yet unnamed but best exemplified by the site of Samdzong, which dates from the 3rd through the 7th century C.E. (Aldenderfer 2010). Although these sites have been described as caves, they are actually shaft tombs. In effect, they are chambers excavated from the ground surface to varying depths. In general, these tomb complexes were created along the face of ridgelines and would not have been visible to passers-by. However, by earthquake or erosion, the façade of the chambers was destroyed, thus exposing the tombs to the face of the ridge (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. The tomb complex at Samdzong. Note the “cave tombs” in the façade of the cliff face.

A similar mortuary tradition is found in far western Tibet. Tong (2011) reports the discovery of shaft tombs near Mkhargdong near the modern village of Kyunglung along the upper reaches of the Sutlej River. In this case, chambers were excavated on relatively flat earth instead of along cliff faces. These tombs were not marked by tumuli or other markers, thus making them essentially invisible to passers-by. Li (2011) reports on a similar shaft tomb mortuary context, labeled the Quta cemetery, near Tsaparang in far western Tibet. Others (Center for Tibet Studies 2008; China Tibetology Institute 2001a, 2001b) also describe a series of shaft tombs from the Gelintang cemetery, which is located in far western Tibet near the important Buddhist-era sites of Piyang and Dungar. Although these sites have not been dated directly with a chronometric method, cross-dating of ceramics found in the tombs with ceramics from the nearby Dindun habitation site, places these shaft tombs from ca. 500 to 100 B.C.E. (Aldenderfer 2007; Aldenderfer and Moyes 2004). Unlike the other shaft tomb complexes in western

Tibet, the Gelintang cemetery has an above-ground manifestation described by Huo Wei and his colleagues as a “maze.” It consisted of a single course of angular cobbles shaped in a roughly spiral pattern. The pattern is said to be unique in western Tibet, and although a function is not obvious, it has been interpreted as a locus of sacrificial activity.

Finally, shaft tombs are known from two areas on the southern flanks of the Himalayas in Uttarakhand at the Malari site, which is dated to ca. 100 B.C.E. and in Himachal Pradesh at the Kanam site from ca. 500-100 B.C.E. (Bhatt 2011; Nautiyal 2011). These tombs are placed along the very steep slopes above a series of river courses, and in this way are quite similar in placement to those found in Upper Mustang. Like those tombs, the Indian tomb complexes are not visible on the ground surface and are only exposed in the modern era by construction and erosion of the context in which they are found.

Singh (2003) reports on the discovery of cist burials in the Kinnaur district in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh in the Sutlej River drainage. The site, at 3000 m in elevation, was discovered accidentally, and only limited rescue operations were conducted. A single cist tomb was opened, and human remains were discovered along with fragments of a bronze goblet. These cist tombs are circular, lined with undressed stone, and range in depth from 50 cm to 1 m. Aside from being circular in shape, they show no other obvious similarities with the tombs from Dindun. No chronometric dates were run on any associated materials, but the author speculates that the site may range in date from 500-200 B.C.E. based upon craniometric analysis of skulls recovered from the site when compared with those recovered from other sites and that have a secure dates. Tombs of this type are apparently common in the upper Sutlej and surround drainages, and Singh (2003:7), reporting unpublished conference papers, suggests that some consensus is beginning to emerge among Indian archaeologists that these tombs, as evidenced by biometric analysis of the skeletal materials found within them, reflect an ‘Aryan’ population that had moved into the region from the north. However, he also acknowledges that the data supporting this assertion are very sparse. Rectangular cist tombs are known from other locations in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh indicating a complex mosaic of burial practices in the region (Bhatt 2011).

Franke (1914) reports on cist burials from Leh. These are said to be stone-lined chambers up to 2 m in depth, and which contain in some instances large ceramic vessels in which disarticulated human remains had been placed. The crania from these

tombs are said to reflect an 'Aryan' cultural affiliation, but it should be stressed that these materials have not been systematically studied.

Telluric burial appears to continue into the imperial period from the 7th through 9th century C.E., but the character of telluric burial begins to change dramatically. Although stone coffin and cist burials persist (see Aufschneiter 1956 for an example), telluric burials are now accompanied by the construction of mounds or tumuli that house the dead. The construction of mounds appears to parallel the increasing social complexity seen on the plateau as the nascent Tibetan state begins to emerge. Visible tumuli signal prestige and power in many parts of the world, and certainly the most impressive examples of this emphasis on social power can be seen in the royal tombs at Phyong-rgyas. However, cemeteries with large numbers of smaller mounds spring up across the plateau as the Tibetan state begins to exert a greater level of control over the region. The telluric tradition does not disappear, however, but is literally embedded in the mounds themselves. Tumuli with underground chambers become common. In some instances, these mounds contain multiple chambers that likely housed ritual spaces or storage facilities for goods deposited with the dead. There is a long tradition in Tibetan studies of attributing the origins of this transformation of mortuary facilities to Central Asian and Indo-European sources. Beckwith and Walter (1997) assert, using cultural similarities and linguistic analysis, that there is evidence of Indo-European cultural practices on the Tibetan plateau as early as 2000 BCE. These are followed by Indo-Iranian influences from 500-300 BCE. In their view, these practices may have strongly influenced the construction of the early royal tombs. Caffarelli (1997: 233-239) argues that much of this new variability in mortuary facilities stems from widespread contact with Central Asia and China as the Tibetan state expands its geographic scope (see also Beckwith 2011).

However, there are some indigenous examples of mound construction that can be dated earlier than the appearance of the large cemeteries of tumuli of the imperial period. For the most part these mounds are found in western Tibet, especially in Ngari, and are composed of small, low platforms constructed of angular stones. Two cemeteries, Langbuqin and Sasongtang, both located near Piyang and Dungar, provide some insight into these constructions (China Tibetology Institute 2001a, 2001b). Between the two cemeteries, more than 100 square-to-rectangular stone platforms were constructed, with most measuring no more than 2-4 m per side. A stone foundation was laid, and a small chamber excavated in the center of the rectangle. In some instances, the central chamber was constructed of embedded stones. Rocks were then piled atop the chamber to form a low mound now more than 20-30 cm in height.

Since most of the tombs were looted in the distant past, it is not possible to determine the true height of the constructions. Further to the west along the Sutlej River, larger stone platforms, in some cases measuring 5-6 m on a side, have been located near habitation sites tentatively dated between 500-100 B.C.E.. These platforms are low, no more than 30-40 cm in height and appear to be solid constructions. It is unknown if these platforms have central underground chambers like those near Piyang-Dungar. If this cross dating is accurate, it suggests two things: telluric burial began a transformation in western Tibet relatively early, and this region may have served as a possible inspiration for the appearance of mounds and tumuli burials in central Tibet at a somewhat later date.

### **Items to accompany the dead, especially animals**

Not surprisingly, there is considerable variation in the contents of tombs across the plateau. The Late Neolithic tombs at Chugong have almost nothing in the tombs aside from some human remains; only one-third of the tombs had other artifacts within them, and these were exclusively utilitarian ceramics (Institute of Archaeology 1999: 271). No other artifacts indicative of gender, occupation, or status were encountered aside from a single tomb that contained a bronze mirror thought to be of Central Asian origin. The dating of this tomb is controversial, but consensus is beginning to emerge that the mirror was likely made between 800-500 B.C.E. based upon a careful examination of stylistic motifs and its chemical composition (Huo 1994, 1997; Zhao 1994). If this dating of the mirror is correct, this find is not associated with the early occupation of the village site. Importantly, no remains of animals were found in any of the tombs of Chugong.

This lack of grave goods stands in stark contrast to earlier as well as contemporary cemeteries in northeastern Qinghai and Gansu at the margins of the Tibetan plateau. Painted ceramics, often in substantial numbers, are found throughout the Neolithic cultural sequence in Qinghai. One of the most famous of these sites is Liuwan, which has burials from both the Banshan and Machang traditions. A total of 257 burials of dating to the Banshan period were recovered, and tombs contained a wide variety of artifacts, including the famous Banshan ceramics, stone tools (both chipped and polished), bone tools, and some decorative objects, including turquoise, bone, and stone beads as well as stone bracelets. In the subsequent Machang period, a significant number of anthropomorphic motifs as well as geometrics that resemble



certain characters of early historic writing systems are found on the ceramics (Chang 1986: 150). Some mortuary treatments are impressive—one Machang burial from Liuwan had more than 90 highly decorated ceramic vessels. Finally, Qijia burials from the region contain large numbers of ceramics and utilitarian objects that reflect gender as well as status and wealth differentials. Of interest, however, is that as in the case of the Chugong burials, no remains of animals were found within the tombs of any of these cultures.

Tomb contents in the northwestern Himalayas, far western Tibet, and Upper Mustang are generally quite distinct when compared to those on the plateau. Tombs of the Chokhopani complex contained personal adornments, including copper earrings (or possibly amulets), ceramics that appear to be restricted to mortuary contexts, and utilitarian objects made of wood and stone. Musk deer teeth were also recovered, and the excavators suggest these were used in a necklace or other body decoration (Tiwari 1985). Finally, the presence of small copper sheets of unknown but presumably ritual or religious function appears to signal a connection to the Indian subcontinent. Similar artifacts with anthropomorphic shapes are commonly found in the so-called Copper Hoards of the upper Ganges river basin and which are said to be associated with the poorly-dated Ochre-Colored Pottery culture of this region (Lal 1951; Misra 2001: 512-513).

Animal remains make their first appearance in burial contexts in Upper Mustang in the Mebrak period (450 B.C.E.-100 C.E.). Alt et al. (2003: 1532) discovered the mummified heads of sheep and goat (13 distinct animals) as well as a complete disarticulated stallion. These remains were found scattered on the floor of the tomb. Other artifacts included glass beads from unknown sources, carnelian beads, textiles (cotton, linen, wool, and other plant fibers), bamboo mats, and personal adornments such as bronze bangles. The dead were placed on wooden platforms that reflect excellent control of wood carving, and in some instances, these platforms were painted with images of wild animals, including the now-extinct red deer and markhor as well as blue sheep (Alt et al. 2003: 1552). At Samdzong, animal remains become even more important as a significant contribution to tomb contents. At least 41 individual animals were recovered, and the species represented include sheep and goat (as well as a category of caprids, a term used when the faunal elements could not be distinguished), horse, and bovids (Eng and Aldenderfer 2011). The sheep, goats, and caprids were represented by skulls and portions of the post-cranial skeleton. Because of the collapse of the tomb ceilings, it is not clear if whole animals were brought into the tombs. However, in the case of Samdong 5, the tomb of a high-status individual, only the heads

of horses, caprids, and bovids were recovered. Other artifacts recovered from Samdzong include various copper, bronze, and iron implements, glass beads imported from Sassania (located in modern Iran), South India/SE Asia, and the Sindh, bamboo and wooden vessels, and copper or bronze personal adornments. A small piece of silk was also recovered; it is unclear as of this writing if it is of western or Chinese origin. A spectacular gold and silver mask was found in Samdzong 5 (Figure 4) as well as the remains of a wooden coffin that likely contained the remains of the high-status individual (Figure 5). The coffin is unique in that it portrays a scene of a figurative rider painted in orange astride a horse painted in a similar color. Finally, the scattered remains of a child aged from 8-12 years were found in the tomb.



Figure 4. Gold and silver mask recovered from Samdzong 5

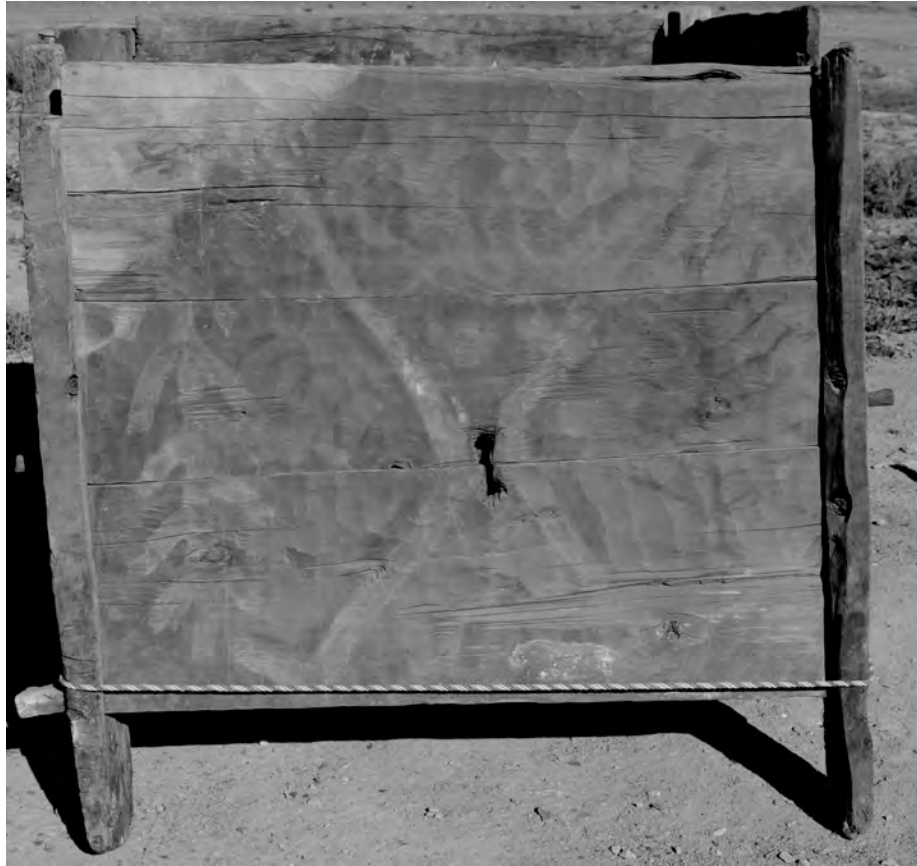


Figure 5. Wooden coffin from Samdzong 5

The content of the shaft tombs from western Tibet-- Mkhar gdong, Quta, and Gelintang—dated from 500 B.C.E.-100 C.E.--are quite similar to those found in Upper Mustang. Mkhar gdong and Quta have wooden coffins similar to those found at Samdzong, and contain utilitarian ceramics, some metal objects, wooden and bamboo containers, and a small number of animal skulls, primarily caprids. A beautiful gold mask, more elaborate than that found at Samdzong but broadly similar, was recovered from Mkhar gdong. The tomb at Gelintang is more complex, and contains a nearly complete horse as well as ceramics, metal objects (bronze/copper and iron), and wooden objects. No coffin was observed. Of note is the presence of what is described as a horse sacrifice pit near the shaft tomb that contained the horse. A disarticulated and incomplete horse skeleton was discovered. The soil around the bones was stained red with an unknown substance, suggesting that the bones and context had been the scene of a ritual interment (Center for Tibetan Studies 2008: 219). The excavators offered no explanation for this assertion.

The tombs from Malari and Kanam are similar; a gold mask similar to those found at Samdzong and Mkhar gdong was discovered at Malari along with ceramics,

some metal objects, and in one instance, a nearly complete skeleton of a bovid said to be a cross between a yak and cattle commonly found at lower elevations in the region (Nautiyal 2011). Other animals include dog, sheep, and goat. No wooden coffins were recovered from these tombs.

### Treatment of the dead

The treatment of the dead is an important aspect of mortuary analysis because understanding the processes involved with preparation of the dead for burial involves both practical and ritual dimensions. Social relationships among the dead may be revealed as well. It is sometimes possible to infer insights into attitudes and beliefs of the afterlife.

The human remains found within the tombs at Chugong include two instances of individuals in a flexed position with their knee tightly drawn to the chin and found lying on their side. The majority of tombs, however, contained mixed sets of skeletal elements deposited in no apparent pattern. Skulls are relatively uncommon in these tombs, and some have as many as two individuals placed within them. Few of the burials were intact upon discovery, suggesting that all burials were secondary in nature<sup>3</sup>. There is no evidence of intentional modification of the skeleton such as defleshing or dismemberment.

The Qinghai Neolithic sites show a limited range of variability. Almost all burials encountered in the Majiayao period were secondary, although some single individual tombs were encountered; these were almost always extended burials. In contrast, those of the following Banshan period were single extended individuals. However, some secondary burials were also present as well as collective burials with as many as seven individuals present. Finally, in the Machang period, the majority of burials encountered were recovered from collective tombs or secondary interments, with a very small number of single individuals. There is no evidence of additional processing of the dead at any of the Qinghai Neolithic sites. In the Bronze Age of the Qijia period, most burials were of individuals lying on their back and rarely, on their side. A few collective tombs

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<sup>3</sup> Secondary burials are those that are likely to have been first deposited or placed in some other context immediately after death. Later, the remains are collected and redeposited in a new location. Skeletal elements are often lost or misplaced during this process. There are instances, however, in which some elements are used for ritual purposes. Secondary burials often appear jumbled or disarticulated when encountered. See Schroeder (2001) for an expanded discussion.

were discovered. Of interest is that some Qijia burials showed signs of limb amputation before death (Chayet 1994: 61). It is unclear, however, if this is an aspect of mortuary ritual or simply the interment of individuals who had lost their limbs in life.

At Sasongtang in far western Tibet, while many of the tombs had been looted at some point in the past, thus scattering the human remains that once may have been present, there is evidence of intensive burning and the accumulation of ash deposits within the tombs. The excavators of the site suggest these are “cremation tombs,” but exactly what has been burned within these tombs remains an open question (Center for Tibetan Studies 2008: 205-209). It is plausible that the burning within these tombs represents a ritual act that did not use human remains.

Although human remains have been recovered from the tombs at Mkhar gdong, Quta, Kanam, and Malari, the context of each of these sites was badly disturbed, and thus it is difficult to be certain about the original placement of the remains within them. At the Gelintang tombs, however, it is clear that the burials found within the tombs are secondary in nature. Skeletal elements are jumbled, and there is significant variability in the types of remains present. The interments appear to be of single individuals, however. There is no evidence of processing of the remains (Center for Tibetan Studies 2008: 210-220).

The burials at Chokhopani and Mebrak in Upper Mustang are exclusively collective; in the latter, the dead were placed in a flexed position on their sides upon wooden platforms in the tomb. As the tomb was filled with more individuals, earlier interments were displaced and placed underneath the platforms and on the floor. The remains show no signs of defleshing or dismemberment, and the presence of various articles of clothing suggests that the dead were placed in the tombs with at least some clothing upon their person (Alt et al. 2003: Figure 3, 1532).

Although there are significant similarities in the treatment of the dead between Samdzong and the two earlier periods of prehistory in Upper Mustang, there are very significant differences as well. The most striking of these is the intentional perimortem (soon after death) defleshing of the dead. Eng (2011) and Eng and Aldenderfer (2011) have documented the frequency of cut marks across the 34 individuals recovered from the 10 Samdzong tombs, and have found that individuals of all ages and sexes had cut marks in different frequencies on their bones. Although the majority of cut marks were in locations indicative of defleshing, some (especially those concentrated on the proximal and distal ends of long bones) are perhaps indicative of some dismemberment of the corpse. Because of the disturbance to the context of the Samdzong tombs, it is

not possible to observe directly the way in which the dead were placed within the tombs. However, given the presence of wooden platforms similar to those at Mebrak, it is probable that the dead were placed upon and around them in a manner similar to that site. Although some pieces of fabric were recovered (especially from the high-status tomb of Samdzong 5), it is not clear if the dead wore articles of clothing.

## Discussion

The transformation of mortuary facilities over time on the Tibetan plateau and surrounding Himalayas is most certainly a combination of indigenous developments mixed with stimuli from other places in the region. Some of the transformations likely had religious motivations, while others appear to be more strongly motivated by social or political concerns.

The appearance of above-ground mortuary facilities—mounds or tumuli that may themselves contain tombs buried within them—is a clear response to growing social and political complexity across the plateau at the end of the Neolithic into the imperial era. The village-based Neolithic era burials in Qinghai and the central plateau show clear status differences as measured by the quantities of artifacts, particularly ceramics, found within them, but there is little evidence of larger political formations that competed for resources and territories at this time. By at least 600 C.E., small Tibetan polities were beginning to coalesce, and Tibet's "first tomb," that of Dri gum btsan po, the putative eighth king of the Yarlung dynasty, must have been created well before this date (Hazod 2007). There is a clear sense that the tombs of the earliest Tibetan kings were in the form of mounds or tumuli, although it remains unclear whether this was an indigenous invention or one stimulated by contact with other groups (Hazod 2007: 276). It is the case, however, that the tumuli took on a potent religious significance as the Tibetan empire began to solidify its control of the plateau and surrounding areas (Haarh 1969). Others have argued that mound construction, especially for the royal elite, was also tied to the extension of the indigenous mountain cult that may have existed in pre-Buddhist times (Karmay 1994). And as I have shown above, Beckwith and Walter (1997: 1039) argue for a Indo-Iranian origin of these tombs that in their opinion, likely dates to ca. 500 BCE. In contrast, smaller cemeteries with more humble, less imposing above-ground features, such as those characteristic of western Tibet, are likely to reflect foci of identity and memory as populations begin to grow. Their visible salience marks a sense of place for the local inhabitants as well as

for those passing through. In this way, they serve to mark boundaries and define territories.

The appearance of animal remains is relatively late on the plateau and surrounding Himalayas and is clearly related to the emergence and diffusion of pre-Buddhist ritual concepts (Stein 1971). Animal sacrifice is well known from much of the Bronze Age and later periods in Central Asia; the remains of horses, sheep, dogs, and yaks can be found in mortuary contexts throughout the region (Baumer 2012). Many rituals associated with these animals are attested in Old Tibetan documents. The horse as psychopomp, or spiritual guide for the king, is prominent in these texts, but sheep take on a similar role (Stein 1971: 490, n.41; Heller 2003).

The earliest known appearance of possible animal guides to the land of the dead is found in western Tibet at Gelintang (horse, caprids) and Quta (caprids) by ca. 500 B.C.E and in Upper Mustang at Mebrak (horse, caprids) by ca. 450 B.C.E. The tradition in Mustang continues well into the 7th century C.E. There seems to be little question that the ideas for this tradition in the western Himalayas comes from a northern or western source that remains to be fully defined and verified. Wagner (et al. 2011) show that complex, mounted pastoralists were present in Kazakstan, northwestern China (including what is today Xinjiang) and Mongolia as early as 1000 B.C.E. Sheep and goat as well as horse remains accompanied the dead in cemeteries associated with the sites of this culture. Recall that the burial masks found in Ladakh, Upper Mustang, and western Tibet also have similarities with those found at sites in Xinjiang and areas further to the west. It thus seems plausible that the tradition of spirit guides may well have diffused from culture complexes in these areas. Alternatively, the concept of spirit guides as an aspect of shamanic practice and ritual is well established in the ethnographies of most nomadic Siberian peoples (Waida 1983), and there is strong evidence for its deep antiquity (Rozwadowski 2008). It is thus possible that such ideas were present among earlier inhabitants of the Tibetan plateau and surrounding Himalayas (Müller-Ebeling, Räscher, and Shahi 2002). However, the complete absence of animal remains in mortuary contexts before 500 B.C.E suggests that if such concepts were on the plateau before this date, they were replaced by other forms of religious practice, such as ancestor worship. The more likely alternative, however, is that the spirit guide concept came late to the region.

Is the spirit guide tradition an aspect of Bon religion? Although it is well known that much of what is seen as pre-Buddhist religious practice on the plateau had many shamanic features (Samuel 1993: 436-456), it is not easy to assign these practices to Bon

because of the extreme lability of the term. However, the spatial association of these funerary practices with the putative location of the Zhang zhung polity in western Tibet and the remnant centers of Bon practice in Upper Mustang are suggestive of such a relationship.

The most curious treatment of the dead in the region is the defleshing seen at Samdzong in after the 3rd century C.E. This has not been observed in any other plateau or Himalayan society, although defleshing and dismemberment are known from Iron Age (3rd-2nd century B.C.E, also known in this region as the Scythian period) southern Siberia (Mednikova 2000; Murphy 2000). It seems unlikely, however, that there is any significant connection between the practices observed at Samdzong and these earlier Siberian examples.

Elsewhere, Jacqueline Eng and I have argued that the defleshing at Samdzong may well be related to Zoroastrian funerary rituals. Such connections between Iranian practices have been anticipated by Kvaerne (1986, 1987). Here, I follow Heather Stoddard's (2009) examination of "décharnement" or defleshing in Tibetan sky burials, which post-date Samdzong by approximately 500 years, describes research conducted by Franz Grenet (1984), who identified apparent similarities between aspects of sky burial and the Zoroastrian practice of defleshing the dead and offering it to animals. Grenet showed that the practice spread eastward beginning in the 1st century C.E. Sky burial itself does not appear on the plateau or in Tibetan influenced areas before the late 10th and early 12th century C.E. (Stoddard 2009: 12). However, it is reasonable to consider the defleshing seen at Samdzong to be an early variant of this process, and one that became better defined and more common after the more secure establishment of Buddhism on the plateau and surrounding Himalayas. Stoddard (2009: 22) also suggests, however, that aspects of sky burial may well have been introduced into Tibet in the 11th century C.E. with the diffusion from India of the *gcod* ritual, which is concerned with the symbolic offering of one's flesh to the universe. It may be, then, that the defleshing at Samdzong is an early variant of the *gcod* ritual. The location of Samdzong along the major north-south route from the Indian sub-continent to the Tibetan plateau makes this suggestion particularly appealing.

## Conclusion

The period from roughly 1000 B.C.E to C.E. 500 on the plateau and surrounding regions is clearly a time of population movement, the diffusion of new ideas and belief systems,



and the growth of social and political complexity. The shift from telluric burial characteristic of the Neolithic to the creation of above-ground, visible tumuli or mounds can be best explained by reference to anthropological theories of the establishment of place, connection to ancestors, and the development of a more robust sense of identity that tied more closely people to a landscape. The subsequent shift to alternate modes of burial practice is best explained by the establishment of Buddhism on the plateau, with its transformation, rejection, and modification of pre-Buddhist forms of mortuary ritual practice. Although surrounding cultures may have provided models for the form and construction of these mounds, their appearance on the plateau is best seen as an indigenous response to social and political processes. The appearance of animal remains in tombs, especially the horse, sheep, and goat (or caprids in general) remains poorly understood. It seems highly probable, however, that these ideas are not indigenous responses or creations, but rather borrowings from regions to the west or northwest. Their absence in Neolithic-era burials on the plateau strongly supports this observation. Whether the appearance of these remains in the tombs of the dead reflects cultural practices which are continuous with practices that later became association with Bon cannot be ascertained at this time. The defleshing of the dead at Samdzong may be explained by either the appropriation of ideas from the west, specifically those associated with Zoroastrianism, or from more southerly sources, possibly from India, as Buddhism became more widely accepted on the plateau and surrounding Himalayas.

Many of these ideas and hypotheses could be tested if the archaeological record of mortuary remains on the plateau itself were more robust. These tests will have to wait, however, until more systematic archaeological research by Chinese, Tibetan, and foreign scholars becomes more commonplace. Until then, we will have to content ourselves with working around the margins and seeking potential sources of new ideas as well as indigenous developments within a more robust chronological framework.

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# Restoring the text of a Mahāyoga tantra witnessed in Early Tibet: an early version of the '*Phags pa thabs kyi zhags pa pad ma 'phreng gi don bsdud pa*'<sup>1</sup>

Cathy Cantwell and Robert Mayer

Since the advent of the New Translation Schools in Tibet from the eleventh century CE, there have been uncertainties and controversies over the texts of the Buddhist traditions which had been established earlier, stemming from the translations begun during the Imperial period. Apart from polemical attacks on the Ancient or Rnying ma texts as inauthentic or degenerate transmissions, there have also been problems of generations of scribal corruption, rendering some texts within the Rnying ma tantra corpus almost unreadable, even by erudite scholarly lamas. The Rnying ma tantras did not generally receive the editorial attention which the commonly shared collection of tantric scriptures, the Kanjur (*bka' 'gyur*), received, and there was only one printed version of the Ancient Tantra Collection (*Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum* or NGB), the Sde dge xylograph edition, for which the blockprints were made in the late eighteenth century. Moreover, the dominance of the Gter ma or Revelatory traditions from the twelfth century meant that the root tantras themselves perhaps received rather less attention than they might otherwise have done,<sup>2</sup> and that many of these tantras retained only their ritual transmissions, and not their explanatory teachings.<sup>3</sup>

Modern academic scholars do not take at face value the colophons or traditional attributions linking specific tantric texts to famous translators from the Imperial period. However, recent scholarship has tended to confirm the antiquity of materials from the Ancient Tantra Collection, even if it is not possible to trace them back further

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<sup>1</sup> Our grateful thanks to the Arts and Humanities Research Council of the UK, who funded the research on which this paper is based.

<sup>2</sup> The transmission was, "complicated by the fact that numerous *gter-ston*... appeared to restore and renew spiritual practices in Tibet.... While the *bka' ma*... declined, the *gter ma* flourished" (Pemala 1982: 2)

<sup>3</sup> Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche wrote that masters such as Mnga' ris paṇ chen, Smin gling gter chen and their students, helped to preserve the commentarial tradition of the *Sgyu 'phrul* (of which the *Rgyud gsang ba snying po* is the main tantra), but other NGB tantras retain (only) their traditions for empowerment and reading transmission ("mnga' ris paṇ chen sku mched dang/ smin gling gter chen yab sras kyi bka' drin las da lta'i bar sgyu 'phrul gyi bshad rgyud dang/ gzhan dbang lung gi rgyun ma nyams par bzahugs pa rnams" Gting skyes *Rñin ma rgyud 'bum*, Preface, 1v.4-5).



than the post-Imperial period. In this paper, we would like to summarise briefly some results from a four year research project on an important Rnying ma tantra and its commentary, the *'Phags pa Thabs kyi zhags pa padma 'phreng gi don bsdu pa* (A Noble Noose of Methods, the Lotus Garland Synopsis, hereafter abbreviated as *Thabs zhags*). This famous Mahāyoga root tantra is in fact witnessed not only in the Ancient Tantra Collection but also in those Kanjur (*bka' 'gyur*) editions which include an additional supplementary section of Rnying ma tantras. Unusually for Rnying ma tantras, the text has a commentary, witnessed in three versions of the canonical commentarial writings, the Tenjur (*bstan 'gyur*), and also in a Dunhuang manuscript kept in London (IOL Tib J 321). Critically editing the root text, with reference to some twenty-one editions of the text (including the root text lemmata within the commentary editions), has brought to light a rather startling discovery. All the principal transmitted editions of the root text, including the printed Kanjur editions and other Kanjur texts of the Tshal pa line, as well as the influential Ancient Tantra Collection versions of Sde dge and of the Bhutanese manuscripts, have inherited shared indicative scribal corruptions. Textual scholars can trace the lines of descent of a text by identifying shared errors between groups of manuscripts, since these errors demonstrate that they must be related and descend from a common ancestor not shared with other versions of the text. Such errors must be significant enough that once they have entered the transmission, the earlier text could not be recovered simply by conjecture, that is, by guessing what the text ought to read. In this case of shared indicative corruptions in the Tshal pa Kanjur, the Sde dge and Bhutanese Ancient Tantra Collection texts, the errors are also found in the Dunhuang manuscript, so they must have entered the tradition by the time the Dunhuang text was copied, perhaps in the tenth century. However, the errors are avoided both in the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection manuscripts, and also in three local Kanjur manuscripts. With the help of these texts, we can now restore the archetype (that is, the ancestor of all extant versions) for much of the text.

Here, we present a summary of the evidence and reasoning which has led to our conclusions on the principal stemmatic relationships between the different editions.<sup>4</sup> Examination of the textual variants of the twenty-one different witnesses of the root text we consulted demonstrated that they can be considered to represent eight different versions of the root text. Four appear to descend unproblematically from an archetypal root text, independently of one another. These direct descendants of an

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<sup>4</sup> For a fuller account, see Cantwell and Mayer, 2012.

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archetypal root text are the three texts of the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection grouping, and the local Kanjurs of Tawang, Hemis and Bathang.

We can deduce that two further textual groupings descended from a word-by-word commentarial text that contained the root text as lemmata. The first of these comprises the eight Tshal pa Kanjur texts, which here must include the Sde dge xylograph Ancient Tantra Collection because it re-used the woodblocks of the Sde dge Kanjur. The other grouping comprises the four Bhutanese Ancient Tantra Collection manuscripts. It became clear to us that these two versions represent two separate attempts to extract the root text from the commentary, since they include substantial yet different selections of additional commentarial text, and they also both omit very much smaller portions of root text, which their editors must have incorrectly identified as commentary. Their apparent inability to identify the root text correctly seems to be due to the fact that the commentary does not always or consistently mark off the citations of root text. Clearly, under such circumstances, an editor is more likely to be cautious and include text where it may be doubtful whether it is root text or commentary, so both versions are significantly longer than the earlier root text, and the Tshal pa Kanjur version is very much longer.

A further textual grouping and one more single witness have still retained their full commentarial character and are thus witnesses to the root text only through the lemmata they contain. These are the three versions of the Tenjur commentary, and the single witness Dunhuang manuscript commentary.

### The Eight Versions of the Root text

*i. The Four Versions apparently descended independently from the same Root Tantra Archetype*

<b>The South Central Tibetan Ancient Tantra Collection</b> ( <i>Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum</i> )	<b>The local (incomplete) Kanjur Collection from Bathang</b> (held in the Newark Museum, New York, and thus sometimes called, the Newark Manuscript Kanjur)	<b>The local (incomplete) Kanjur Collection from Hemis Tshoms lha khang</b> (He)	<b>The local Kanjur Collection from Tawang</b> , originally from the O rgyan gling Temple (Ogl)
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	(Bth)		
Gting skyes (T)			
Rig 'dzin Tshe dbang nor bu (R)			
Kathmandu (K)			

ii. *The Two Root Texts apparently descended from the Commentary through extraction of its Lemmata*

<b>The Kanjur</b> ( <i>bka' 'gyur</i> ) texts (Tshal pa line)	<b>The Bhutanese Ancient Tantra Collection</b> ( <i>Rnying ma'i rgyud 'bum</i> )
'Jang sa tham or Lithang Kanjur (J)	Mtshams brag (M)
Peking Kanjur (Qk)	Sgang steng-a (G-a)
Snar thang Kanjur (Nk)	Sgang steng-b (G)
Urga Kanjur (U)	Dgra med rtse (Gr)
Sde dge Kanjur (and Sde dge Ancient Tantra Collection) (Dk, D)	
Lha sa Kanjur (Hk)	
Ulan Bator Kanjur (V)	

iii. *The Two Commentarial texts that contain the Root text as Lemmata*

Lemmata of the root text within <b>the Dunhuang manuscript of the commentary</b> (Ms)	Lemmata of the root text within <b>the Tenjur</b> ( <i>bstan 'gyur</i> ) <b>version of the commentary</b>
	Peking Tenjur (Qt)
	Golden Tenjur (Gt)
	Snar thang Tenjur (Nt)

Stemmatic analysis of relations between these eight versions show that the Dunhuang manuscript, the Tshal pa Kanjur texts, and the Bhutanese Ancient Tantra Collection edition share indicative errors, including a significant accidental loss of a long passage

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of text in the final section of Chapter 10. This error is avoided in the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection, the local Kanjur versions which give this chapter, and the Tenjur edition. Thus, on the stemma diagram (see below), the loss must have taken place in a now lost manuscript labelled c. Unfortunately, the Tenjur has an even greater lapse at this point, losing several chapters of text starting in the middle of Chapter 6. It picks up the text again a few lines before the end of Chapter 10, before the end of the material lost by the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur, and Bhutanese witnesses, showing that it did not share their ancestor who lost the passage. There is little doubt that this additional material, found in full in the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection and two local Kanjur texts, is both appropriate and necessary here. Even before we had collated the local Kanjur witnesses, we had concluded that it was unlikely that the South Central tradition's ancestor had composed the passage and inserted it to fill the gap. The subsequent collation of the local Kanjur witnesses, coming from regionally distant areas, confirmed the conclusion that the passage must have been in the archetype.

The evidence is as follows. Chapter 10 is on the mudrās of the deities of the peaceful maṇḍala, who are listed in full in the Commentary's Chapter 7, while their mantras have just been given in a clear order in Chapter 9. The lost passage in the final section of the chapter continues exactly in sequence following on from the mudrās of the deities given in the chapter so far. The chapter gives first the mudrās for the male peaceful deities, although it appears to omit the four males in Vairocana's circle. Where we would expect them to occur, the mudrās for the female deities commence, at first in no obvious logical sequence, which might suggest that we might have some textual corruption at this point. On the other hand, the original tantra may not have had such an orderly schema as that outlined in the commentary's Chapter 7, which in any case does not entirely correspond clearly to either the root text's mantra or mudrā list. However, following what seem most likely to represent the mudrās of most of the principal female deities, the text begins with the females of the retinues in a clear logical order corresponding to their layout in the maṇḍala, as described in the commentary's Chapter 7, and given in precisely the same order as the sequence of mantras in the root text's Chapter 9. The chapter stops abruptly in the versions which share the loss of the passage, with the second female member of Ratnasambhava's retinue (*rdo rje 'phreng ba*), omitting the others of Ratnasambhava's group, as well as those of Amitābha's, Amoghasiddhi's and Vairocana's groups. The closing passage, given in full in the South Central Tibetan version, and also in the Tawang and Bathang

local Kanjurs,<sup>5</sup> begins at the correct place, with the third female member of Ratnasambhava's retinue (*rdo rje me tog ma*), and continues as we would expect, apart from a puzzle in the final lines of the text.

There is one just conceivable – but extremely unlikely – alternative explanation to the hypothesis that the South Central Tibetan, Tawang and Bathang versions preserve a passage once witnessed in the earlier archetype of all the current versions. In this scenario, the editors of an ancestor of the South Central Tibetan, Bathang, Tawang and Tenjur versions might have inherited the already corrupted version, noticed the omission of a large number of mudrās, and attempted to restore the text by writing the extra lines. It would seem safe to discount this unlikely possibility, especially given the distances separating these editions, as well as other evidence suggesting, for example, that the Bathang Kanjur has texts which represent a tradition of extremely early readings.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, Tibetan editors of such scriptural collections seem rarely to re-write or add large sections of text, even where they find significant corruptions. There are other incoherencies in the *Thabs zhags* text – including the apparent loss of order in middle of the Chapter 10 mudrās mentioned above – which none of our editions has attempted to resolve. Moreover, if the final passage were a deliberate construction, one would have expected it to supply all the missing mudrās, taking care that they correspond to the correct deities' names. However, the final few appear to muddle Vairocana's male and female retinue, giving

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, we are missing the Hemis folios at this point, although the number of its missing folios would seem appropriately to correspond to the length of the missing text, including this passage.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Skilling (2001) reviews features of the Bathang Kanjur, and for our purposes here, makes two important points. First, he points out that the collection must be a copy of venerable exemplar(s): "Its antiquity may be seen from the orthography (particularly the transliteration of Sanskrit), the arrangement of contents, and the inclusion of texts excluded from or missing in the comprehensive Tshal pa edition, which was compiled in CE 1347-51". Secondly, Skilling's specific study of the Mahāsūtras, "suggests that the Newark Kanjur belongs to an old and independent textual transmission that predates the compilation of the Tshal pa and Them spangs ma collections" (2001: 74-75). Michael Zimmermann's detailed work on the different editions of the *Tathāgathagarbha Sūtra* confirms this picture. Zimmermann makes clear that, "Bth is the only known representative of a separate, paracanonical translation of the *Tathāgathagarbha Sūtra*. Judging from its terminology and syntax, it must have been executed before translations became more standardized following the compilation of compendiums like the MVy [*Mahāvvyutpatti*] and the *Sgra sbyor bam po gnyis pa*, that is, before the early ninth century" (2002a: 166-167). He argues (1998: 35) that this translation seems to have been based on an identical or very similar Indic original to that used by the later translation, but that it seems very unlikely that the later translators/editors had access to this earlier work. Moreover, not only does the Bathang version of the text fail to use the standard translation vocabulary, it also uses terminology which has parallels in other early translations, while its translation seems to attempt to keep so close to the Sanskrit source text that it is stilted and partly unintelligible in places (Zimmermann 1998: 46-49). See also Zimmermann 2002a: 24-26, and 2002b. Siglinde Dietz (2002: 17) also attests to the "frequent independent readings" found in the Bathang Kanjur version of the *'jig rten gzhas pa*.

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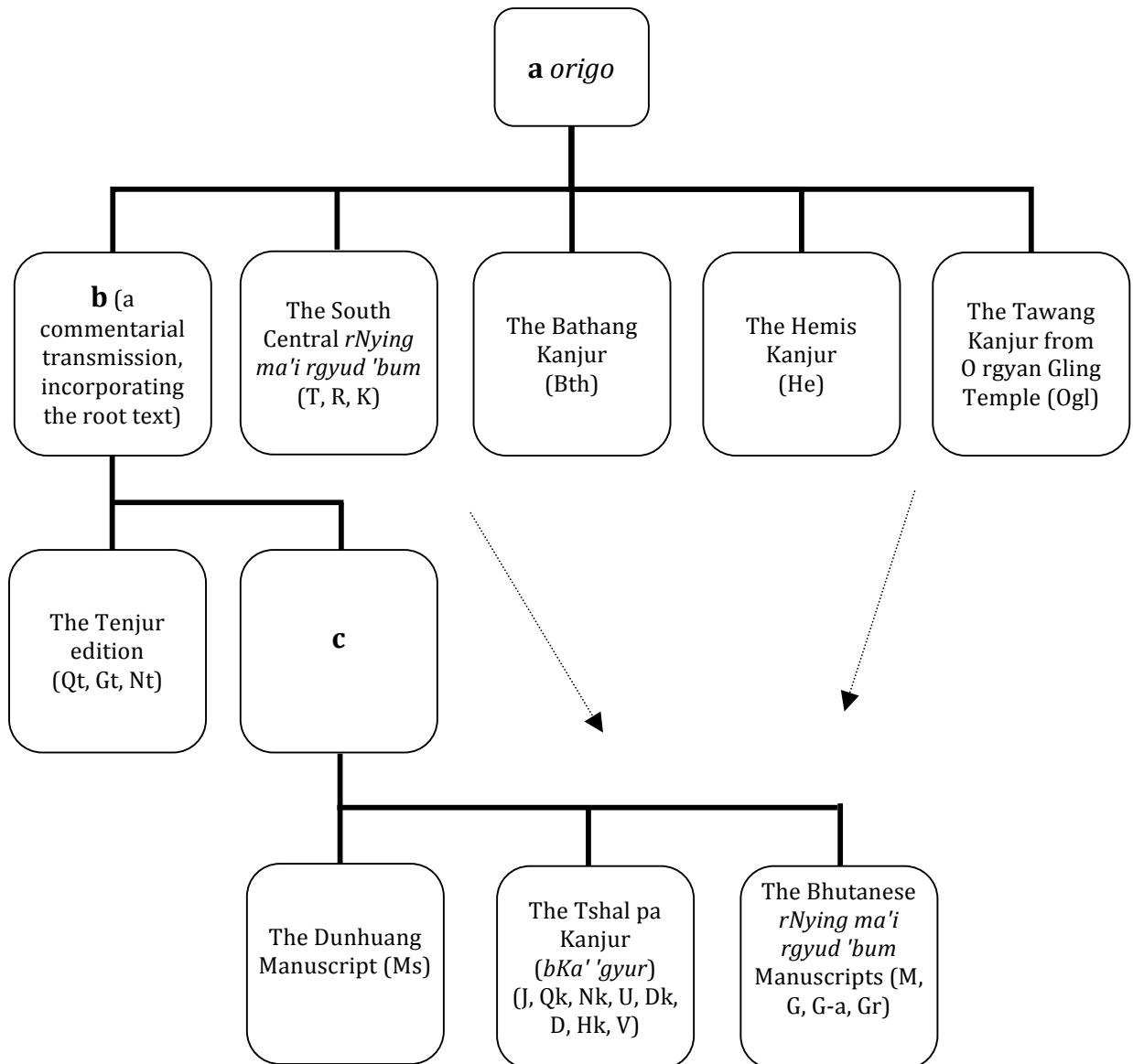
the male names with female particles, and at the end, we still seem to be missing one of the principal female deities. If Vairocana's male retinue is intended for the final names, it would surely make more sense for an editor involved in substantial re-writing, to insert them in their logical place earlier in the chapter. Perhaps one slightly more conceivable possibility is that rather than a re-writing job, the editors found another tantra with the same set of deities and inserted the missing list from its list of mudrās, thereby explaining the slightly odd presentation of the mudrās for the final deities. This hypothesis would gain support if such a text were identified, especially if it has female versions of the list of Vairocana's male retinue as found in the *Thabs zhags*. However, unless such a text were to be identified, it would seem almost certain that the South Central Tibetan, Tawang and Bathang texts have preserved text which genuinely goes back to an earlier version before the loss of the passage in the other editions. When added to the further evidence of shared errors in the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur and Bhutanese editions, we can feel confident that the most straightforward explanation for the loss of the passage – a scribal corruption within the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur and Bhutanese branch – is the correct one.

Other errors reinforce the picture of the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur and Bhutanese texts forming one branch of the transmission. However, some of their shared errors and readings may in fact represent a larger group including the Tenjur as well. Unfortunately, the Tenjur version of the commentary has lost perhaps thirty percent of the text. Clearly, a similar proportion of its root text is thus also missing. We can therefore divide the distinctive variants into those which the Tenjur definitely avoids (as in the case of the Chapter 10 passage loss) and those where the Tenjur is missing, so its reading is unknown.

Minor errors and numerous shared readings between the Dunhuang, Tshal pa Kanjur, and Bhutanese texts, together with the Tenjur texts, indicate that these groups can together be considered to constitute a single major branch of the transmission, against the South Central Ancient Tantra Collection and the local Kanjur texts. Comparison of these five separate branches, which most likely descended from the archetype separately, has helped to restore the readings which were most likely to have been present in the archetype, for much of the root text. Where a reading is supported by a majority of the five branches, it is most likely the earlier reading. There is only real uncertainty where there is no clear picture, such as when the commentarial branch has a single reading that is unlikely to be archetypal, while the four descendants of the stand-alone root text are equally divided. Such cases generally concern only very minor variants.

### Diagram of the proposed Stemma of The Root Text of the 'Phags pa Thabs kyi zhags pa padma 'phreng gi don bsdu pa

Note that the solid lines of descent indicate merely the direction of transmission, often through many generations of copying, and the length of these lines has no significance. Thus, the South Central transmission is likely to have descended through far more copyings than the Dunhuang manuscript. The arrows represent tentative possible directions of limited contamination, from a branch other than b.



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For those who may doubt the antiquity of the Rnying ma tantras, it is worth reflecting not only that the existence of the Dunhuang manuscript demonstrates that the *Thabs zhags* and its commentary must date from some point prior to this tenth or eleventh century copy, but that one branch of the Ancient Tantra Collection transmission preserves text which must descend from a version of the text pre-dating the omission which the Dunhuang manuscript shares. Often, the assumption is that the highest status, most carefully edited editions of a tantric text will be the "best", and this is often the case, especially if one is looking for accurate spellings and a minimum of careless scribal errors. For example, the Tshal pa Kanjur texts tend to have conventionally accurate spellings and grammar, and contrast with less carefully made editions, such as the Bathang local Kanjur manuscript, which has innumerable omissions and corruptions throughout. Yet once a serious corruption has entered the transmission, every direct descendant will share it. Moreover, in pre-modern Tibet, there was not always the opportunity to seek out alternative editions: in this case, in two separate incidents, important editions depended on a root text extracted from the commentary, presumably because the root text itself was not available to the compilers of the edition. Hence, we witness a situation in which all the mainstream branches of the transmission, including the printed Kanjur and Ancient Tantra Collection editions, share a major loss of text in Chapter 10, as well as confusion between the boundaries of the root and commentarial texts, and a host of other errors. On the other hand, texts preserved in outlying areas have avoided these problems, even though they vary considerably in other respects. Thus, as mentioned above, the Bathang Kanjur manuscript version is full of careless mistakes, while generations of scribal copyings have resulted in a fair number of errors in the South Central Tibetan manuscripts. In contrast, however, the local Kanjur manuscripts from Tawang O rgyan gling, and from Hemis, are rather remarkable in showing few errors of any kind. Some apparent spelling variants may in some cases simply represent archaic or non-standard spellings rather than later corruptions, and they are seemingly very close to our reconstructed archetype. Unfortunately, a few folios of the Hemis manuscript are now lost, but the entire text of the Tawang O rgyan gling manuscript is intact. Its only significant error is in Chapter 10, where it identifies a mudrā as that of *rdo rje sems pa* rather than *rdo rje legs pa*, a rather impressive achievement in some fourteen folios of text. This manuscript Kanjur came originally from the Sixth Dalai Lama's family temple.<sup>7</sup> Copies

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<sup>7</sup> See Jampa Samten 1994. This edition of the Kanjur had been commissioned and copied in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries at the temple of O rgyan gling (the Sixth Dalai Lama's family temple), on the basis of an earlier gold and silver illuminated Kanjur (*gser chos bka' 'gyur*).



of it are not yet widely available, but we can conclude that recent and ongoing scholarship on the various local Kanjur manuscript editions may hold in store further discoveries quite likely to help to illuminate our understanding of early Tibetan Buddhist texts.

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## Notes from the Field

This section introduces current research directly bearing on Bon or indigenous religions in the Himalayan regions within or bordering the cultural sphere of Tibet.

## Ancient Rituals in a Twilight World

Fabian Sanders

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Arunachal Pradesh is a marvellous place. This recently formed state of the Indian Union sports a kaleidoscopic variety of climates, flora and fauna as well as ethnic stocks and related cultures. This region has escaped most influences of the outside world. Only the recently formulated Donyipolo<sup>2</sup> religious movement has had a significant impact on the traditional religious environment. This movement strives to institutionalize, make uniform and confer political presentability upon the scattered shamanic cults existing here. For example, the Donyipolo zealots often consider the shamans who make use of trance states to be 'heterodox' and in response have started to build temples, something that is completely alien to the very essence of these traditions, for which nature itself is the temple. The Donyipolo church draws adherents mostly among the

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my friends and colleagues G.G. Filippi and S. Beggiora, who participated in all the journeys to Arunachal, for sharing their expertise and a wealth of information. Many thanks also to S. Schwarz for reviewing my English.

<sup>2</sup> Donyipolo, sun and moon in Adi language, is the name of a somewhat artificial new religion aimed at adapting for the modern world the extremely complex and variegated beliefs of the Adi and Apatani tribes. Founded by Talom Rukbo in the nineteen eighties, this movement strives to record in writing the tribal ancestral mythological and epic heritage, but introduces many concepts completely alien to the tradition – like standardised rituals, equalitarianism, transcendent divinity and so forth – and aims to strip the cult of some of its ritual core – like spirit possession and animal sacrifice. This religious phenomenon still awaits serious academic discussion.

various branches of the Adi and Apatani tribes who live in the central and mid-western regions of Arunachal Pradesh.

The north-western districts of Tawang and West Kameng are home to some 91,000 people belonging to five tribes: the Mijis, Akas, Buguns, Sherdukpens and Monpas. The latter is a tribe of Tibetan stock; its name in Tibetan generally designates those peoples who live in the lowlands towards the south, beyond the Himalayan watershed, from the point of view of the Tibetan Plateau. In Tibetan literature, *mon yul*, a term that can refer to regions as far apart as Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan and the whole of India, often connotes areas where Buddhism is not practiced and people are hunters, thus insinuating their 'barbaric status'. In Arunachal Pradesh, the term *mon pa* has come to indicate a particular tribe, also called Menpa or Menba by the speakers of Indic languages, which includes people living in minor settlements scattered in the areas along the Tibetan border as well as in Bhutan. In the two districts in which our research took place, Tawang and West Kameng, the 1981 census recorded a population of around 35,000 Monpas belonging to the Tawang, Panehan, But, Dirang, Khoitam and Lish sub-groups.

The main religious, cultural, commercial and administrative centre of the Monpas is the town of Tawang, dominated by its massive Dge lugs pa monastery, the Dga' ldan rnam grol lha rtse, which in the last four centuries has been the local fountainhead of institutional scholastic Buddhism in the area, entertaining close links to Lhasa up to the mid-20th century.

As one descends towards the plains and across the high mountain Se Pass, the doctrinal influence and charisma of the pure monastic lifestyle of the Dge lugs *dgon pa* gradually fades away, with less institutional forms of religious belief and practice becoming increasingly prominent and finally supplanting it.

### Religious environment

Small Rnyig ma gonpas and related isolated village lamas scattered in the various settlements are more common in the districts of west Kameng, where mostly elderly and isolated monks administer their cult alongside other individuals who perform rituals according to what appear to be very ancient forms of religious worship. We could describe these as belonging to a local form of the Bonpo (*bon po*) tradition, characterized by numerous traits that could be broadly defined as 'shamanistic' even though they are not necessarily fully contained within the confines of that term. This

can be established from the fact that in general the shamanic world lacks a higher heavenly dimension, which, as we shall see further on, is in general present here, at least as a post-mortem possibility.

Together with a research team from the University of Venice, I travelled to these remote areas three times in a period of seven years<sup>3</sup> and I have been able to survey this extremely interesting environment, also witnessing some relevant changes that have been taking place in the recent past.

In the severely impoverished areas farther apart from the main settlements, religious life is thriving. On most days, it is likely that in one or the other of the small huts in a village a ritual of some kind will take place.<sup>4</sup>

Apart from Buddhists, we encountered a number of religious specialists who could broadly be defined as Bonpos, although, as we shall see later, only some of them refer to themselves using this term. In many instances the generic Hindi term *pūjāri* or the Nepali word *jañkhri* are used.<sup>5</sup> All these denominations are part of the vocabulary of both the functionaries themselves and the people who seek their services. It appears, on the other hand, that in this area it is not possible to simply define as purely Buddhists those who seek guidance, advice or ritual performance from Buddhist lamas, nor is it possible to call Bonpos all those who come to Bonpo priests. In general, the majority of people refer indifferently to one or the other, mostly depending on the specific nature of the problem that urges them to look for assistance and on their faith in the ability of the various specialists to provide some form of solution. Often, they tend to try out all different choices available until their issue is resolved.

We had the possibility to witness this apparent syncretism on several occasions, for instance when we were invited into a hut in the village of Sallary where a yearly offering ritual for the spirits was performed by a Bonpo priest.

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<sup>3</sup> Our research journeys took place in the autumn of 2001, 2002 and 2008.

<sup>4</sup> These rituals include the sacrificial offerings of alcoholic beverages, seeds, smoke, animal blood etc. as well as various forms of divination and are carried out both inside shelters and in the open air at crossroads, in the vicinity of water streams, crevices and other places where spirits are said to dwell.

<sup>5</sup> In this context it is interesting to note that this region is characterized not only by remarkable religious promiscuity, but by tremendous linguistic diversity as well. In particular, along with the various native Monpa dialects, a considerable number of Hindi terms and usages are common, mostly functioning as a *lingua franca* among speakers of mutually incomprehensible dialects. As a consequence, we were able to communicate quite well with locals. Another point that deserves mention is that tradition and culture in these areas are transmitted orally only: hence the use of predominantly phonetic transcriptions of names and other terms in this article.





Bonpo priest wielding vajra and ghanta. Photo Fabian Sanders.  
the hours-long ritual without even saying his name.

Many Buddhist prayer flags had been hung around the dwelling place, and at the door Buddhist mantra charms were attached side by side with some *mithun*<sup>6</sup> skulls. As the *pūjāri* performed his ritual, a woman from the family continuously recited the six-syllable *mantra*. Unfortunately, the Bonpo did not want to be interviewed and rushed away straight after

## Cosmology

Given all the imaginable differences in the conceptions, beliefs and goals of the religious specialists fostered by the various traditions of this area, there is one feature that is common to all: the notion that the empirical world, the bodily aspect of existence subject to observation by our senses, abides side by side with a subtle dimension. This is reflected in a cosmology which, in its more complex, broad and complete forms, encompasses all the gods of existence who dwell high above in the heavens, gradually descending along a very detailed hierarchy through the so-called 'Eight Classes', the local guardians and down to the *pretas*, demons and all the different classes of chthonic residents. An important place in this pantheon is accorded to the natural spirits of mountains, lakes, rivers, hills and valleys. These are thought of as the subtle or psychic aspects for which these geographical features represent the body.

As is well known, the Tibetan tradition in particular envisions a subtle world of extraordinary complexity, spanning all vertically stacked horizontal levels of existence, from the celestial realms all the way down to the underworld. The gods living in higher

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<sup>6</sup> The *mithun* (*bos frontalis*) is a cross-breed between an Indian *gaur* and another species of bison. It is domesticated but normally roams freely in the outskirts of villages. It is the sacrificial animal *par excellence* among all tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

realms are understood as being more luminous and powerful, and the luminosity and power of beings progressively decrease towards the lower realms where darkness reigns.

Consequently, a great deal of effort in terms of rituals and practice is devoted to perpetuate or restore a harmonic relationship with these sentient beings, which are mostly understood as living in a bodiless condition and, according to their nature, can nevertheless be worshipped, petitioned, summoned, queried, even tamed, subdued and enslaved. The gods and spirits are known to have a close interactive relationship with the human world, which they can influence both on a macrocosmic level - in terms of weather, harvest, pests, epidemics and so on - and a microcosmic level - individual health, prosperity, misery, fortune and disgrace, for instance. The reverse is of course equally possible: gifted or trained individuals can establish various kinds of relations with these beings. These relations function mostly on a *do ut des* basis.

From the point of view of entertaining this relationship, in the case of our area of interest, it is possible to divide the religious professionals - both Buddhist and non-Buddhist - into two main categories: those who rely mainly upon mechanical<sup>7</sup> rituals of offering, ransom and so on, and those who have the necessary quality and ability to enter a state of trance and during this condition are possessed by gods or spirits. The second group can also be divided into two and consists of those whom we can call oracles, who are possessed by gods and officiate their services with the help of a ritualist lama, and those who are possessed by inferior gods or spirits - ancestral or geographic - and act alone or with the help of an interpreter/assistant.

### Officiators or functionaries

In the district of West Kameng, in the areas of Dirang Dzong and the Naphra Circle, officiators of all these categories are present side by side. I will not discuss in detail the Buddhist oracle of Sapper, currently represented by the *sku rten*<sup>8</sup> Dge legs Chos bzang, living in a village just a few miles upstream from Dirang, but I would like to point out a few traits that distinguish the oracle and the Buddhists in general from all other

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<sup>7</sup> Hereby is meant a mechanical repetition of gestures and utterances, which does not involve any participation or alteration of the performers mental condition. Aside from the ability to carry out the rite no qualifications such as an initiation, an acquaintance with a spiritual practice or the ability to directly communicate with spirits, are required.

<sup>8</sup> A *sku rten*, lit. 'physical support', is a technical term used to designate the person who lends his or her body for the deity to possess.

officiators in the area. First of all, the Buddhists, even in the case of village lamas, always trace their knowledge back to a specific 'human' lineage of teaching which is well known in the area, belonging either to the Sarong Gonpa in the Tawang district or to the local Rnying ma monastery of Dirang. Secondly, but most importantly, even though they might be primarily involved in rituals for the benefit of the community, the Buddhists always keep in mind the final goal of human existence as set out in the teachings of the Buddha: the obtainment of freedom from rebirth and the realization of Buddhahood. Consequently, they apply the methods - meditative and tantric - that help them to proceed on the path. This cannot be said of any of the other categories of ritual officiators in the area: independently from the scope of their cosmology, they perform rituals with the exclusive intent of solving problems of a worldly nature. In general, as we shall see further on, they simply pursue the accumulation of power in order to increase their efficacy and hence their status.

The first type of non-Buddhist religious functionary active in this area is the so-called *phrami*. The *phrami* is the primary and ordinary priest of his community, the depositary of the traditional oral culture of his people. He is supposed to know the myths and legends of his clan and takes care of daily rites, the consecration and maintenance of sacred places and so on. It is his duty to give advice on the rules of conduct which allow people in his community to live a prosperous and harmonious life in order to proceed towards a desirable post-mortem experience. He also is involved in performing funeral rites. The function and knowledge of the *phrami* are hereditary in a patrilineal lineage from father to son.

In Dirang Dzong we had the opportunity to meet and interview the *phrami* Pema Dragpa, an elderly man belonging to the Dirang Monpa sub-group who was particularly exhaustive in illustrating his function and the situation of his profession, of which, to his dismay, he was the last remaining representative in the area. The *phrami*, he said, does not have the ability to enter states of trance and thus to be possessed and have a concrete, personal relationship to subtle beings. He performs mechanical rituals, even of a remarkable complexity, but does not see the beings to which the ritual is offered. For this reason he admitted that the *phrami* is probably a less powerful figure among the Monpas in terms of efficacy, but at the same time the inability to enter into trance keeps him safe from the polluting and contaminating contact with inferior spirits, demons and malicious beings. In contrast, he said, many Monpas tend to engage in contact with these beings with the sole intent of gaining more power. In fact, he set out a code of conduct, probably influenced by the Buddhist monks, so strict with regards to

purity of behaviour and even dietary prescriptions that it seemed practically impossible to avoid hell, especially in the local social and economic milieu.

On the other hand, the cosmology and eschatology he described also allowed for a kind of heavenly status after death, a *pitṛloka* of sorts, for those who observed the correct ritual and conduct rules. It is interesting to note that in purely shamanic contexts, which always have a bipartite cosmology, this heavenly dimension, which fits into a tripartite image of the cosmos (earth, heaven and hell), remains unknown. While deprecating the fact that many people nowadays prefer to consult the Buddhist lamas, Pema Dragpa affirmed that the *phrami* is in fact the most important among Monpa religious figures and reinforced his remark by saying that the ancient forefather of all the Monpa priests was one ancient mythological person named Bon Sharamira who came from the east spreading the (Bon) tradition. In the heavens too, a kind of archetypal deity of the *phramis* resides. Called Kunman Jemo, he is the protector of all his followers.

In any case, the other religious figures of the Mon-pas, although technically



Phrami wearing the horned peacock headgear. Photo Stefano Beggiora.

more powerful, often refer to *phramis* as their lamas, persons who can give reliable advice drawing from traditional knowledge.

Let us now consider the other preeminent religious figure among the Monpas of the Naphra district, particularly the But and the Khoitam sub-groups. These religious functionaries, interestingly, call themselves and are called Bonpos. They are identified by their peculiar ability to enter states of trance and thus to be possessed by subtle beings having supernatural qualities. The individuals we had the oppor-

tunity to interview all share a similar personal history; it matches that of comparable figures who have been widely described in scientific literature relating to Central Asia, the Himalayas and the Indian subcontinent in general. They inherit their ability from some members of the previous generation of their family after their death and, most often during puberty, experience dreams and visions, often accompanied by some periods of apparent insanity during which they roam the forest, seemingly aimlessly. They call this troubled and painful phase the 'initiation' stage, during which they are contacted and possessed by the spirits of their deceased ancestors. In the process, they gain experiential knowledge of the subtle world, make acquaintance with their 'spirit guide', are taught the methods of inducing their own trance and are familiarized with the arcana of ritual and its performance. This innate ability is founded on what can be considered a gift or an anomaly, a phenomenon that is explained as an opening, a hole or a crack in the psychic integrity of these individuals. It is said that through this opening they give and have access to the subtle world of gods and spirits.

We had an opportunity to meet and interview three Bonpos in the villages of Jerigaon and Sallary in the Naphra Circle of West Kameng. Two of them had very similar features. To begin with, their ritual attire and paraphernalia are extremely interesting and symbolically quite explicit. The headgear, formed by folding a woollen scarf around of a woven basket-like framework or just around two wooden sticks, reproduces the horns of a *mithun*. The *mithun* represents the civilized, well known and safe environment of the village. Some peacock feathers, a widely used symbol in Tibet and India, are inserted between the two 'horns'. In this case, the feathers may well be a reference to what is generally known as 'shamanic flight'.

But the most striking ritual implement of the Bonpos is unquestionably a wooden tablet that is slung over the right shoulder to the left side. This tablet is said to be the power source and store of the Bonpo priest. Dried animal parts or bones are tied to its flat surface with some vegetal fibre strings. On the two tablets belonging to the Bonpos 'Guruji' Wang Di and Chetang Ropu, we were able to identify a hornbill beak, the skull of a dog (or similar), some eagle claws, the hoof of a *mithun* and, most importantly, a varying number of lower jaws from a tiger or leopard. In Hindi, the term *sher* is quite generic and can designate any big cat, but in any case at least symbolically a tiger is implied. As is evident from the thick blood stains that cover it, the tablet is re-consecrated at least once a year, by ritually sprinkling over it the blood of a sacrificed *mithun*, in particular on the jaws of the tiger. This blood, understood to be the vehicle of



the animal's *ātmā* or spirit, is supposed to nourish the spirit of the tiger, represented by its jaws.



Chetang Ropu's Ritual Tablet. Photo Fabian Sanders.

The *mithun* headgear and the tiger tablet identify the highest ranking religious functionaries of the Bonpos in this area. The jaw of the tiger is procured by a Bonpo during his 'initiation' period in the jungle in the course of a kind of ritual hunt; otherwise tigers are a hunting taboo. Those who rightfully possess the tablets draw their power and abilities from Juhung, the tiger spirit, an extremely powerful being whom they call their subtle guide or *guru* and sometimes their *śakti*, its female form. This spirit - a kind of god or goddess of the jungle - dwells in the forest; it epitomizes the wilderness, the uncivilized and dangerous unknown.

In addition to these implements, it is interesting to note that in this context all the Bonpos use the classical Tibetan style *vajra*<sup>9</sup> and a bell (*dril bu*), in lieu of the normal Bonpo *gshang*. The rhythmic sound of the bell, which contrary to Buddhist practice is held in the right hand with the *vajra* in the left, occasionally integrated with a single skin drum, is a necessary element that allows the Bonpos to enter a state of trance.

In their trance sessions, Guruji Wang Di and Chetang Ropu are possessed by Juhung, and through its power they roam the mysterious wilderness of the subtle world of spirits. Here they are able to diagnose the specific subtle aetiology of problems that have manifested for their clients, which they will try to solve later, after the session, through the performance of the appropriate rituals. During rituals such as these, the Bonpo shaman sits on the ground and arranges a small altar in front of him. Then, depending on the complexity and importance of the ritual, he places a varying number of mats or woollen scarves in front of the altar on which the invited spirits are requested to sit. A small metal offering dish is prepared for each spirit. The Bonpo, in ceremonial dress, then starts his jaculatory prayers, accompanying himself with the bell and sometimes giving clear signs of entering a trance state. These signs are a general tremor, some clonic jolts and often ample and fast up and down movements of the head. When the spirits have arrived, abundant oblations are offered. Rice, corn, dried fish, *chang*, *arak* and other alcoholic drinks as well as the smoke of burnt herbs are all presented one after the other. As Chek Cha Lamaji (the third Bonpo we met) said: 'I offer the *ātmā* (soul) of the fish and the *arak* to my guide *ātmā* and the others'. Finally, after entreating them to help solve the problems that prompted the ritual, the spirits are requested to return to their abodes.

All of our informants, both Buddhist and Bonpo, unanimously conceded the great power of those who have an intimate relationship with Juhung, but at the same time they dreaded the possibility of those people being overpowered by their savage guiding spirit and, for the sake of accumulating great power, derailing into sorcery, witchcraft and black magic. We do not have the time to discuss this aspect in detail here, since its origin can be traced back to the creation myths of Monpas, but according to tradition, the practice can result in a metamorphosis of the religious figure, a therianthrope shift in which the Bonpo becomes a kind of were-tiger, and is then

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<sup>9</sup> The *vajra* is also sometimes used to perform a kind of preliminary divination aimed at ascertaining whether the ritual, the possession and so forth will be successful. In this divination the *pūjāri* attempts to put the *vajra* in a standing position on a brass or bronze offering vessel with the help of some rice grains and the rim of the vessel.

obviously considered extremely dangerous for the human community. Parallel phenomena can be found in traditions from other areas of the Indian subcontinent.<sup>10</sup>

The danger of were-tigers, along with the performance of animal sacrifices still quite common in the area, meets with the firm opposition of the Buddhist lamas. As an example, the first two times we met the Bonpo Chetang Ropu in the village of Jerigaon, with an interval of around one year in between, he proudly and openly spoke about all the details of his office, carefully explaining the nature of his guiding spirit, the appearance and form of the spirits he encounters during his journeys, the importance and employment of his paraphernalia, his power to solve the most serious problems and so on. Then, about five years later, in 2008, we met him a third time. Along the main road, the village was now festooned with brightly coloured *dar lcog*. Chetang Ropu, looking much more shy and unpretentious than before, was wearing a Buddhist *mālā* around his neck and was very reluctant to speak about his Bonpo duties. His tablet was still hung on the wall of his hut, but he referred to it as a mere inheritance from his forefathers, without much use nowadays. He had, spontaneously it seems, come under the influence of the lama of the small local *gonpa*, who had re-consecrated him, confirmed his role as the *pūjāri* of the village and given him the *mālā* and a mantra to recite. Chetang Ropu still performed his rituals, but said he avoided animal sacrifices.

In light of this dramatic change in the attitude of Chetang Ropu, it seemed clear that for the Buddhist lamas, the taming of the savage gods and demons of these remote areas once begun by Guru Padmasambhava is not yet over. In a small chamber in the Dzong of Dirang, a black stone venerated as a relic is held to be the petrified heart of a demon once slain by Padmasambhava as he strode through these lands. Perhaps someday it will be joined by the heart of Juhung, the tiger spirit.

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<sup>10</sup> We had a similar encounter in the outskirts of the far eastern Arunachali town of Tezu, this time in a Mishmi settlement.